

# Rule Two-Fifty

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## A.T.A.

Please try to understand that this book was not written by me, but by the Londoner within, the man trapped in a child's body.

He's wanted to write all his life, but until now I've been busy caring about other worthless stuff not worthy of recall. I don't enjoy writing like he does. I'm simply a bystander like you, caught in the dopamine waves not a moment after he paints the most beautiful landscape, dotting lightning in the background as if his hands could move that fast.

For those of you who are confused; I consider myself a soul to my body, part of the greatest duo the world may ever see. Just as one day he will be left with naught but pain to love alone, as a soul, a friend, it is my duty to do whatever he declares to be necessary.

*For Holly. Fellow daring dreamer.*

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# Prologue - Such A Ridiculous Word

All I could hear was the rain echoing around us. I could feel it dripping down my fingers as if it were leaking out from my bones. I looked back to the mouth of the cave, breathed in, and spoke clearly.

“I have seen the future far too many times. What is strange about them is that they all end the same, someone kills me. I don’t know if I will be avenged, if I’ll ever have children, but I do know that I’ll remember that moment forever. I can see every second. Not the longest *deja-vu* I’ve had, but for some reason, my favourite so far. I imagine the smile that illuminates their murderous eyes...the thrilling moment I finally become disadvantaged and my brain panics so much that it simply gives up right there and then, like it has already died. In the vital second, maybe milliseconds before I have time to create an idea to help me escape, my body will be pierced. Sometimes with enough force to crush me out of consciousness, others with accurate slices to fillet more than enough nerves in my limbs. And then I just die.

“When I told this to dear Benjamin (may he rest in peace), he suggested I was cursing myself. “Should your dreams always come true,” yet they always do, “I expect your last thought will be recognising this moment to be your last rather than thinking of a way to survive.”

“Benjamin Stay was the wisest, the greatest man of all time. A friend, an inspiration, a rock for us all to lean on. I would like to thank you all for your part in bringing him peace. Not only is he a symbol of the way things once were, but also of the struggle we few went through to change the world, accomplishing his dream of making the world a better place. He would want you all to dream the same.

“And so. I hereby law that all laws are to be governed by the men and women they protect. May the everlasting code be honoured by all. Benjamin Stay, may you rest in peace.”

I turned away from the sullen faces bowed to the floor. Then I looked up to the souls of the three-hundred-and-seventy

warriors that had set the footing for my path. *I have found my purpose.* Our leader held my hand tightly, blessing me with her honour. The elder nodded.

“Proceed.”

It didn't take as long for me to write it in stone, the number 371 followed by my law:

“ALL LAWS ARE GOVERNED BY THE MEN AND WOMEN THEY PROTECT”

I scribed the words deeper than every one of the others, grinding my nails into dust. I stepped carefully round the pit to return to our men. The elder nodded again and we each took turns to bury Benjamin in the pit, one fistful at a time. I furrowed my brow in frustration, desperately trying to maintain my mask of composure.

“What did you say this was called again?” I muttered.

“Funeral.”

A snort escaped out my nostrils, inaudible to anyone but the two of us.

“Such a ridiculous word.”

“We also say the word burial, if you'd prefer that.”

I paused to think about that one for a moment, tilting my head from side to side, swirling the word around, tasting each letter.

“Much better.” I sighed.

“It suits you people.”

She stepped forward to add the second-to-last fistful to the grave. Part of me was too frightened to take my turn. But what could I do now? I had been given the most time to say goodbye.

I hopped to what was left of the earth pile, a single scraping of mud. Everyone's eyes were on me, I could feel my strength draining into them. With a heavy heart, I patted my handful onto the grave.

“You will live on.”

# 1 - The Master

Long before anyone ever called me Captain, I was but a watch, a lookout, burning the memory of everything I saw deep into my brain, looking for change outside the slightly ajar window at the sun rays waving through the clouds, any indication at all that the rain would stop sometime tonight. As grim as the evening felt, it was a peaceful night that we kindly appreciated, around a tenth of the way to sunrise. Somewhere out there was a quiet rhythmic melody, the smacking of boots on wet cobblestones, perhaps a lone horse being ridden through one of the town roads which were blocked from my line of sight.

A thick, grey, smoky haze silently floated out into the cold from this cubicle, this box where the writer's mind had become a mess bigger than his mind could handle. Ink stains were painted expertly on both his desk and his uncuffed silk shirt, dressed with what seemed to be acres of scrunched up paper in the most pointless effort to absorb it. In a way, it seemed to blend in with his sheepskin loafers in both filth and colour.

“Something's not right!” he snarled.

Then he stood up in fury to perform his mad routine word for word.

“Everyone's the exact damn same, they're all *defensive*, doing whatever scares them the least! Bliddy *cowards*!”

He snatched the paper off the dinner table, shaking the dead ash off. He took a long draw of his pipe, filling his lungs like a professional deep diver.

“To whomever it may concern,  
I'd like to inform you that the law the Lord of your parish has posted, with regard to our forefathers holiday traditions, is utter and complete—”

He slammed the paper on the table then whipped his head at me in an accusatory fashion.

“See now, it can't be too formal or they'll start saying I paid someone else to write it! How do I talk respectfully to someone I jolly well HATE!”

He pulled out the only dining chair, as if it were politely waiting to ask him to be seated.

“So there's no way in all the waters, no crumb, no bubble, no chance at all, that any of these stupid cauliflower heads are ever going to listen!”

In his fury he tightened his grip around the chair's back and tossed it into the wall across the room, knocking more papers off his desk. But he's always been the same way. Sober, smoking, shameless.

There's not much to be said about the room. It was one of the only ones I've ever heard of to have a toilet less than ten paces to the right of the bed.

And it wasn't going to get *too* smoky because all the smoke that had layered on the ceiling would start randomly punching through upstairs' floorboards.

Everything was organised in the messiest way imaginable. Papers, desk, bed and sink on the left, bird cage kitchen, dining room on the right. Everything was in plain sight, exactly where he could keep an eye on them.

I couldn't tell you what he was going on about this time. Most days it was some odd stranger he didn't know from Adam that had made some sort of decision that managed to annoy him into a heated argument with himself, staggering left and right like some lonely drunkard.

Odds are I'm being a touch too soft, but something magical happens when people like that talk to themselves. It's simply a matter of expression to them, you feel the chaos stirring deep inside that disturbs them and silently unnerves them, hoping too

it will spill out to leave but absolute peace. This man had a duty, yet was always alone spewing more smoke than anyone or anything else in the world. Though it might have scared a puppy, I inhaled it as naturally as oxygen. I saw him as a boy, a more able me that could challenge the laws.

A few hours later he resigned to the wooden chair, resting the pipe, an indication to himself it was time to cool down and descend back to his illogical mad self. There was no bedroom. He slept on his bum with his head against the wall, til it got too stiff that the aching pain woke him up. The toilet had been repurposed into a door stop. This particular man preferred the window, I think mainly to stop any visitors getting too comfortable.

“I love crows.” he sighed.

“Craftiest animal alive, you can only hunt it in the day, and they don’t fear a bliddy thing. Why that’s what I should be. I should be a crow...”

He drifted off with his head slamming on the desk. Snores filled the room. It was my job to wake him if he started sleep talking.

My eyes were closed as I began to enjoy the silence. But then there were footsteps, the sound of heavy Damascus steel making the dangerously old pine floorboards creak from downstairs.

I suppose it was my own fault, I should have panicked sooner.

We weren’t the only ones in the building so there was a pretty big chance they were visiting someone else.

When someone’s footsteps are consistent, that means they both know where they are going and know what to expect. I didn’t start concentrating until I heard them on the stairs. The footsteps kept pace. There was no struggle or relaxing. *Then why are they so loud?* Even iron boots wouldn’t make so much noise. These men were physically trained to support a larger body weight than normal. But I just smiled mischievously, *I wonder who’s caused trouble tonight?*

As they got off the stairs onto the landing I could count them. Three soldiers, one leading. The idea that a military official would drag bodyguards entertained me. Maybe I should figure out which neighbour was overly active? It never hurts to hear a few things. So I started counting the footsteps and didn't flex a single muscle. I could even see the smoke pulsing from the doorway, echoing the soundwaves, rolling towards me. It took two dozen paces before my eyes flickered open and fixated on our entrance. They hadn't stopped at next door's room... and we were the last ones on the floor.

Still I didn't panic. Instead I imagined how sensational it would be to watch the poor souls run in terror, the harsh tongue of darkness scarring their hinds with the most hideous lashes yet. They gave two stern knocks on the door.

“Mister Benjamin Stay?”

The Mister Benjamin in question growled lowly, propelling his head forward with the wall and storming towards the doorknob. He didn't like being disturbed, especially not at this hour. He had barely stood before the harsh knocking began again. Now it was on. I could almost feel his temper flare.

The master unlocked the door and dropped his gob as he was shoved quite viciously against the wall. Smoke poured out the room, abandoning us both. My immediate instincts were to tense my muscles and freeze. *If I don't move they won't notice me straight away.* They then proceeded to lock cuffs onto the practically immobilised madman. A single ink pot wobbled off the table and shattered with the most horrible sound, shattering glass plopping a viscous liquid on the floor. As if it were muffled but refusing to stay silent.

“Well excuse me!” he spat angrily.

Waving his arms around madly, I suppose he thought it would express something important. Oh? He was trying to hide the papers.

“Mister Stay, do sit down. I'm afraid we need to have a chat.” The officer spoke rapidly, very fed up with the matter already.

His troops barged their way past to search the area, for their own safety I presume. Their gear clicked and clanged noisily, a heavy metal set that wouldn't even squeak. Well kept boots reflecting the polish of the breastplate, making them appear to glow, at least in the pitch black.

“Sergeant Roland of His Royal Highness's knights, here on official duty.”

He glanced around the room to make sure we were alone. Then he addressed us again.

“Now do take a seat, Mr. Stay. I've absolutely no personal interest in you whatsoever, so I'd rather finish talking sooner rather than later.”

He followed his sentence with a rather aggressive drag by the cuffs into the room, kicking the door shut, while simultaneously managing to throw him onto the chair. It certainly took the old man by surprise and snatched the breath right from his lips.

“Open a window already!” Captain snarled.

“Sir, they're all locked!” A soldier barked back.

It became clear that his impatience wasn't just for show. The captain wasted no time approaching the closest window and punching his fist hard into the wooden slabs, then forcing the panes to crack out of place without breaking a single pane of glass. He then followed his chin over his shoulder, back to the dining chair holding a very angry user.

“How *kind!*” Master Benjamin chuckled.

“Pleased to remain so kind, sir.”

That just humoured the master of the house even more. A twisted smile grew across his face, a forced illustration of a man who would not be intimidated.

“Oh, I haven't even—”

“Excuse me.” Captain Roland nodded at his companions. Together they poured Master Benjamin's belongings out of his trunk, then proceeded to pack it with his books.

He then removed his right gauntlet, the one he used to blow out the window, collecting his thoughts while massaging his

knuckles. “Allow me to answer all of your questions.”

Nearly all the smoke had cleared out by now. The captain removed a half melted candle from his pocket, delicately balancing it between the cracks of our table.

“We have summons from the king to interrogate you on suspicion of treason.”

He struck a match, encouraging the old master to gaze through the gaps of his helmet before lighting the candle.

“The sooner you ask me the sooner I'll deny.”

“Well said, sir.”

Captain Roland looked back at his men. It took a while for them to notice he was gazing at them, but when they did they returned the signal of rapidly shaking their heads, rattling their armour in chorus. Why, our neighbours must have had their ears pressed against the walls. Noone but Mr Kono, three doors down, could sleep through this racket.

“I don't believe you're a resistance leader for one moment.”

Captain Roland turned back to Master Benjamin.

“Even this apartment is uncomfortable, though it's by the standards of an impoverished mouse like yourself.”

The master simply laughed again.

“Why, don't be so quick to judge Captain! I'm always full of surprises they say!”

Noone else was amused in the slightest.

“Well then, if you're bent by the wind on wasting my time, I think I'll skip ahead. What is your occupation?”

“Retired.”

Captain Roland leant forward intrigued.

“And how does one retire so young?”

It was a witty compliment if nothing else. Somehow it didn't fit this man, probably a police trick to make us more willing to cooperate.

This time it was the master who was not humoured.

“Tricks of the trade, Captain.”

“Didn't you write a book recently?”

“Ah, how can I deny that now you’ve seen my ink supply?”

That seemed suffice for the captain. He leant off the table, satisfied.

“Mister Stay, I’m arresting you for the use of propaganda to incite rebellion forces. ”Confiscate his belongings. Bring the bird.”

Next thing I knew a bag was pulled over my head and tied. I was carried out onto the streets into the smell of horse manure.

*When had he noticed me?*

And while the darkness clouded my mind, fear took over my body. I knew screaming would make it hard to breathe but I did it anyway. *Every neighbour must know what was happening to us.* *Someone needs to save us!* Master Benjamin, wits and all, had met his match tonight. Despite every trick he’d ever learned, he’d been outspoken into a jail. All I remember hearing was the whinnying of a horse right before I started being shaken about. Eventually I ran out of air. And everything went dark.

Master Benjamin threw water over my face. All of a sudden I remembered the fear, the breathlessness, my mind went in a frenzy. The water broke my eyelids apart. I couldn’t stop gasping for air.

“Go back to being dead, if you will,” he scowled.

I could only the sullen figure as he stood up and slunk away. His footsteps were so quiet now. Then I gauged my surroundings like he taught me. Stone slabs covered the floors and walls. Our only light source was on the other side of the master, I could see his silhouette grabbing onto bars. This fancy prison cell had more breathing room than our living quarters.

“I know what you’ll say.” he muttered.

“We’re here because *I’m* the one who made the wrong choices.”

I got up to comfort him, slipping on a soggy bag and collapsing on my nose instead. It wasn’t until I attempted wiping

it off that I noticed the smell.

“You vomited before I got the bag off. Also we’re out of water.”

I moved to the corner to scrape the gunk back into the sack, using the dirt from the floor in an attempt to bury the odour.

“If I hadn’t been so defensive or shown the captain humility, there would’ve been another road. But I’ve nothing to hide. I’ll have the king judge my righteousness, and take that as proof.”

He turned back in the shadows.

“At least I know you won’t doubt me, least of all now.”

We just sat thinking through the night. Looking back, this was the most peaceful moment we had ever had together. Two ghosts in the dark, preparing for the next time they would haunt the living. No chaos. Just the sounds of our breathing reminding each other we were alive. By the looks of Master Benjamin, he had little interest in escaping unlike myself. Even so I managed to notice a gap at the top of the back stone wall just big enough for me to crawl out of. Although it might take a while for Master Benjamin to make his way up there, we could both fit, though I’d have to check how high we were. That also meant it was night again, most likely the next one after the last. A distant boom echoed down the corridor but it was followed by silence. Just then, I could hear chains clashing against each other. And footsteps. Guards were coming, in the same formation as before.

“Empty your mind now, don’t let them sense anything untoward. They want me to do something for them if they haven’t harmed me yet so we really ought to take every advantage.”

I nodded. Had he noticed me looking to escape? Eh. Knowing him he was more probably reassuring himself again. And nothing gets past that old man.

We were greeted by none other than the now famous brigade of Captain Roland.

“You don’t look too happy to see us.” The master frowned jokingly, gazing deep into the eyes of the steel helmet.

“Likewise” came the bored reply.

The right guard unharnessed his keys, unlocking the cell.

“Go.”

Master Benjamin tucked in his shirt and then held out his left hand to me which I flew to grab onto tightly. As we exited I couldn't help but stare. There was enough tension between my master and their captain to drive anyone mad. Neither respected the other. No more eye contact but they were writing on the wall. I doubt they heard us talking, the captain was acting perfectly normal. Saying that though, he had brought a sword in his belt. And there was even less doubt he would hesitate to use it, either to kill or injure one of us. Master Benjamin's wrists still held imprints from his once-too-tight restraints.

We followed Captain Roland's march, keeping exact pace with the guards behind on either side of us. The tunnel was dark, dingy and dusty. Aside from all the torches we could barely see anything. Even the floor was coated with flickering shadows. At the end were two torches marking a turn. Around the corner we had to head up a spiral staircase with large oblong windows, half of them revealing tonight's full moon. The first thing to do in unmapped territory is to remember. Remember your route, any landmarks, take in as much information as possible. But since it was dark I remembered what I couldn't see. Smells of burning wood carrying ash with the sound of shrill laughter. An owl calling for someone, we must have disturbed it. I imagined a manor within yards of countryside plagued with bountiful food, whether it be cooked or raw. Compared to our city of coo poo, my nose was swimming in luxury.

At the top of the staircase came a much brighter corridor dressed with lit chandeliers drooping from a polished metal ceiling. This landing had masonry tiles cut in a fashionable zigzagged style. Brick walls lined the borders kindly allowing us more room than necessary. This room was windowless, stretching far, instead showcasing sets of alcoves along the side filled with ceramic vases each filled with all sorts of new flower breeds I had

never seen in my life. All I could recognise were bluebells with similar versions in both white and violet.

More impressively, each vase appeared to be identical from the rotation to the placement of each individual flower. The commander of knights must live here, demonstrating his men as immaculate, faceless hounds that would stay at his side until he decided otherwise.

Eight vases later the path split into a crossroads. My head was hanging off my left shoulder when one of the guards from behind crept into the corner of my eye. He had deliberately accelerated. They were herding us to turn right through another archway. Out of the shadows and into the moonlight. Around the corner was a quad with no roof. Our path was guided by trimmed and flattened pearl tiles that were brighter than the white marble archways. Each grassy half on either side bordered the most artificial garden. More and more rare plants. Without a water source, it gave a good impression of our lord-in-waiting.

The final archway was attended by two guards. Behind them was a tall brick building and another arched iron double door. They flinched as soon as we got too close, opening both doors, revealing a glossy interior. More iron was stuck to the unreachable ceilings and spat six armed candlelight chandeliers at each corridor leg. Inside were more guards holding their own giant heavy doors. Unlike our sweaty escorts their suits masked the scent of rich wine. Then without so much as a glance they let us through, then one by one, closed their doors.

The captain stopped. As did the smell. We found ourselves in a sort of chamber, a red carpet soaring from right to left, across another pool of white marble, unwinding itself just before a second door.

Captain Roland grabbed the master by the collar, dragging him to the center of the room. And he turned to the right, the direction the carpet came from. Atop the stairs stood the guards of the king.

“Master Stay?” The king inquired.

“Yes, your majesty.” Captain Roland bowed his head sternly. I could hear his brigade growling back at the door. Master Benjamin took no notice, waiting to be introduced to. We stood there in silence.

The king sighed, bored.

“You've been arrested for treachery against your king and your country. How do you plead?”

It was impossible not to memorise that accent, so formal, yet unlike Master Benjamin's there wasn't the slightest monotony. Each word had its own pitch. So this was the legendary King of E, King Zaz. (It's important to note that "zaz" is a common word for "What happens now?")

“Innocent as a lamb sire.”

“Oh really?” The king turned to one of his personal guards.

“Master Stay, do you deny being a renowned writer in your district?”

“Only if my district includes your home, sire.”

The king looked down, overly humoured.

“Perhaps you underestimated your influence on the world. That's not a crime in itself.”

The king stood up, flaunting his red spotted white cape over purple silks and dark brown boots polished to a degree only trees could be jealous of. He then descended, in unison with his two guards.

“Do you think you and I are the same?”

Master Benjamin paused.

“No, I don't truly believe yourself to be human. I can't see what exactly all your wealth is hiding, it doesn't look like a man to me.”

“Sir, how brutish. If all you have for power is a way with words, you're a child at best. Thousands will rise to replace you, a man unfit for even the army.”

The king dismounted the last stair and pondered.

“I've never seen a beast that thought it was human before.”

“May you see many more—”

“Follow.”

Captain Roland shoved us into stepping forward. We followed the king past the staircase through another door into an arched corridor.

Master Benjamin turned angrily to the captain. “I see you got your charm from one of the kinder sows.”

This corridor was dark, hosting portraits of the king and all of his predecessors. None of them looked alike. I didn’t bother to memorise the dead ones.

“As a man who follows the laws of our country I can at least say you have earnt my acknowledgement.” The king looked backwards over his shoulder.

“I don’t care for insurgence.”

“You should know then I know nothing of an in—”

“What do you see here?”

The king stopped in front of a landscape. It was a manor at the base of a large hill. The artist had stood at the top of the hill, capturing youths playing in the heat, resting in a lake. But at the top was a dark cloud spanning the west, casting a shadow on the entire hilltop. Master Benjamin raised an eyebrow. “A rhetorical question.”

The king ignored him professionally.

“This is a picture of my dream. A *deja-vu*, if you will. My scholars tell me it indicates great change. One that will interrupt the lives of my loved ones, thunder to rule over my voice, an army from the west taking every advantage from me.

“Master Stay, I do not believe the future can be altered. It is the kings that have and that will rule in my place, trying to warn me, telling me to watch every advantage.”

He had unknowingly rolled his hand into a fist. Once he noticed he relaxed his body and sighed, spinning around, cape flailing. We marched on.

“Sir, you are to write the people a new story. One that strengthens them with life instead of smothering them with death. Once you are done your crimes will be atoned for.”

Master Benjamin smiled politely. “Who will atone for our hygiene?”

“I will be sure to reward a good deed with such liberty.”

The master scoffed. “You really ought to change my toilet water while you’re at it. We wouldn’t want to pen the wrong thoughts now, would we?”

But the white hot smoke never left his eyes. Back in the cell he started to curse loudly. They had collected some parchment and ink for him and left it there for us, knowing he would accept.

“Blast it all!” he screamed.

“Man is the devil I tell ya! Of all the twisted fates and curses to ever be set upon a man, bring dragged a mile to *work*?”

He kicked at the jail bars repeatedly. They rang well, eventually becoming the loudest noise of our very eventful day.

“Bleeding our souls dry!” Next came the manic pacing, back and forth, back and forth, winding up his mind and breathing in deep. I don’t know if it was the frustration from missing his pipe, but something snapped in his head. He stopped pacing, crouching over the parchment, an odd smile seizing his face.

“Pass me a feather.”

I winced, eyes widening as I struggled to see whatever he could show.

“Write you a story, eh sire? You’ll be sure not to forget this one.”

The next three days were a manic scratching. A masked guard would walk past everyday, tossing in a measly, mouldy, morsel of bread for Master Benjamin to scoff manically, ensuring that we hadn’t died. Day four the parchment was collected and exchanged for green mouldy bread, the master scoffing it whole, demanding hot water for a bath. We saw noone for the best part of a day. But the king was not satisfied. Later that night, Captain Roland returned alone with his sword unsheathed. It took one fell blow to kill him. I could feel the electricity leak from his fingertips. Shock captured his eyes, the world seemed to be in slow motion as he tripped over his own legs in confusion. He tried to shield me with his stomach, unknowingly spilling his guts in front of me.

“The King has found you guilty of breaking law two-hundred-and-fifty.”

There was a rattle of a key when the light was leaving him. They were coming for me.

“Be free.” he whispered.

Without hesitation I scrambled up through the crack of the wall. We were at least ten storeys high, well above the castle walls.

But I was scared. So I jumped.

*What do we do when we get hurt? We always look forward.  
We don't look back.*

## 2 - No Time

With every muscle but those in my diaphragm, I shot myself into the air and flew as fast as I could, past the land border where I'd be safer, listening out for the air currents, boosting my speed at every opportunity. The closer I got the lighter the storm felt. Time was running out. *You will live on.*

A sudden gust of wind pummeled me up above the clouds. There was a swirl of wet blackness and I spread my wings wide to try stabilizing myself. Instead of the oceans all I could see were cumulonimbuses, the darkest storm clouds glowing in the dark of the night. Each one had a heartbeat, and whenever they pulsed a beam of white light connected them, building static charge barking to be set free. I felt the panic melt and insanity began to set in. I heard what my owner would say, *head straight for them.* My face contorted into a wide crazed grin. I didn't know what else to do, all I'm good at is following my instincts. I tucked in my wings and took a deep breath. A simple nose dive, propelled by the wind, heading straight for the light in the clouds. I can't say I knew I'd survive.

When the beams hit me, I felt the energy surge. My legs turned to twigs holding on for dear life. The wind dispersed and there was a delayed boom as the sky erupted. At first it was painless, it felt like I was being pushed under the clouds by a fly. Then the clouds broke apart and I could regain my bearings. The first thing I saw was sand flying in the air. But the grains looked terrified, they began to scatter from the light above, whistling tiny screams and moving so fast that I knew I couldn't open my wings not at this speed.

The second thing I saw was lightning. It had crashed out of the clouds with me and had begun racing me to the ground. By the time I realised what it was, the heat of it hit me like a ball of fire. I looked back at it but by now the adrenaline was gone. Pain and fear took over me, making me sick. I felt trapped inside my head, closing my eyes tight to make myself blind to everything but the road I had travelled, every event that had led to this moment. *I chose to fly through the clouds...why?*

I opened my eyes again to the ground quickly getting bigger. It was like everything was in slow motion. Lightning seemed to float down sporadically, gently tapping the island a mile from the coast before it began to fade, then almost out of nowhere, a powerful wind sweeping the grains out of existence in a red explosion of energy. I started spinning but I had given up all hope by now. By my next heart beat, my last one, I would be swallowed by the sand. There wasn't even enough in my stomach for me to vomit again.

The last thing I saw was a man. He was in midair leaping away from the lightning strike less than a foot from the ground. But he hadn't seen me yet, and I had half a second to aim. *Save us.* With the last of my strength I pulled my wings open as far as they would go. The wind did its best to push them back, creating a brand new sense of agony. *Don't scream. Focus.*

As I fell, darkness swallowed me. I don't even remember hitting the ground. Thus began my everlasting nightmare.

I'm home in my smoke filled room standing at the window. I can feel it seep past me through the gaps of the frame, and as I start to concentrate, trying to figure out if I am safe, that loud stubborn heartbeat punches through my ears. I call out. "Master Benjamin?" Then my entire body collapses as a hand waves the smoke out his face. "What is it?"

In this dream I can talk to him, ask him questions like I already knew the answer. That night he scared me though.

"I had a bad dream," he admitted.

I had to keep flapping my wings to keep his face clear of the smoke clouds fighting once they erupted from his pipe.

"I get stabbed in a disgusting room that smells of vomit."

His eyes were glossy and unfocused, paralysed by the toxic fumes. He didn't look scared. Just revolted. "I'll be damned if anyone tries to make me leave this room, got it?"

If I had despaired, he would never have listened to me anyway. Even in my dreams he would just sit there and huff more smoke into the air.

"You can't let this happen, please sir! Take control!"

"You can't control the future, it's already been decided." he

sighed uninterestedly.

“Do you think I’m crazy to sit here and wait to die? I’m unlike every other man?”

Fire glowed from his bloodshot eyes irritated by the fumes. Sparks started jumping around making tiny booming sounds, almost like they were coming from me.

“It’s insane to not be a human? Then when I’m dead I’ll be as insane as you, Crow.”

Lightning crashes through the floor and I rush to grab Benjamin instinctively. He doesn’t even react. I’m grabbing onto his hair trying to pull him up, exhausting my wings, but we’re both falling. Through our downstairs neighbours roof. Then the next one. And it’s impossible to decipher that dream. Do I let him go or do I turn into him? He’s dead no matter what because he chose that. I guess I choose to keep him alive.

The warm sun managed to slowly peeled my eyes open without my own assistance. As the dreams were fading from my mind, I heard the roar of the ocean, bringing me back to the shocking reality.

*My Master Benjamin was confirmably dead, executed by order of the king in front of my own eyes.* As my fingers clenched in invisible pain, I started to wonder what I was feeling. Then it hit me. *The island last night was real.* I picked up a handful of sand to make sure I hadn’t died and left my body for paradise. And then my heart slowed as I focused my vision. The sun had begun its daily descent, leaving me a calming glow from the distinct stars above it. Rain pattered lightly from above. There was no telling how much time I’d lost, the storm clouds were still headed west towards me.

I don’t know why I couldn’t figure it all out straight away, maybe I was so injured, or maybe the journey had exhausted me so badly. I still couldn’t think straight. I was mourning...my master...the most loyal man alive that detested ill memories so, almost as much as forgetting them, had died miserably. Everything in the past was gone, blown into dust that could never repeat the same pattern again.

Something was watching me. Even so, all I could think of was

the sun and its refusal to shine. Like a cold blanket of light...that made me feel the more I thought about it, that something out there was trying to reach me.

That something grabbed my leg and I howled. I had to howl even louder when I realised my arms were in blistering pain, scorched black, red and blue by my crash landing. The thing dangled me upside down. In my despair, I let my instincts take over. *Play dead.*

It's a strange, inexplicable feeling to hope whatever's clawing at you is doing it for fun. I shut my eyes, let my mouth hang open and relaxed, letting it shake me around like any old broken thing. Then it dropped me. For an instant I forgot the pain I'd feel when I hit the ground.

It was paralysing. My cries echoed and my eyelids flew open, catching a sight of the beast for the first time.

It stood like a statue, stuck still in the wind, dressed in knight's attire. It would have been a fine suit too, had it not been missing the boots or started getting rusty cracks at the sides. These cracks were hypnotic...I couldn't find strength enough to turn away from the impossible dim glow within them.

Cold, white claw marks radiated from each side, reflecting chalky imprints on the blackboard sand. And inside its helmet was a face like no other man's.

The left eyeball was cracked down the middle. It had a gloss that made it seem like the jelly inside had preserved the insides where the arteries were barely visible. It looked like a half-egg, half-chick staring down at me. And its other eye was dull, dare I say bloodshot to the brink of rupture.

The cheeks were sunken like a mythical creature's, and its hair spewed out the back in a fountain, falling almost level to the ground like the rope of an anchor.

Its entire presence was colder than fear. I watched, my entire body trembling, as it inspected me. Lightning fell from the rain between us, an inch or so in front of our faces. It burnt like nothing else but I still couldn't move.

My opponent seemed even more unfazed. It didn't even flinch. It started crouching down...poking me with a

stick...grabbing me by the neck and picking me up effortlessly.

Staying still may have been the best decision I have ever made in my life. From the moment it picked me up, the lightning started surging through me. The creature started shivering, then shaking. Invisible bees buzzed towards it, stinging it with surprise. It let out a terrific roar, leaping back and dropping me again, this time on my back. I must have cried in pain, but I don't remember hearing it. I must have been too stunned by the shrill noises the creature was making.

I flinched as the helmet landed a foot from my face. I rolled onto my stomach where the pain hurt the least. Something in the atmosphere was changing, was the rain getting heavier? I saw the creature, crouching down, staring at me.

It had the same look Master Benjamin always had. Behind the cladded exterior was the spirit of a small child. While one pupil was shrunken, by decades of pain I presume, the one with a crack had a kindness to it gazing brokenly into the distance as if it were busy watching the wind dance with itself.

It had broken the hairs on the right side, so as to keep it out of the good eye. The one that wouldn't stop watching me.

Slowly, it stood. Waiting for something. For me?

I mustered my recklessness and did my best to copy. Surprisingly, the burns no longer hurt. I only had to bend my exposed wounds away from the increasing rainfall.

It started walking up to me, as calm and gentle as anything.

When it arrived, it simply crouched again. It reached into a pouch on its belt, producing a makeshift leather eyepatch, then proceeded to tie it over my burnt wing. I didn't have the mental capacity to deal with any more pain, so I just stood there motionless.

Then it got up again, heading for the sea front. Thunder rolled out from the far west. It was headed to the north side.

Something inside me, whatever it was that saw my master in

this beast, had a moment of inspiration. I'm still not sure what it was, the oncoming storm, its act of kindness, my complete and utter emptiness yearning for something new, I followed it. All the way up to the water's edge. It held out a stick for me to grab onto, its armour sparkling in the rain. In that moment, that something inside me had decided. This was one of life's lanterns. Something to guide me.

Honest to gods, our odds of being alive the next day were slim to none and to this very day I don't have so much as an insect's hint to how we survived...it felt like we had to shed an entire skin of blistering warts just to get away from the island. The waves were too terrifyingly loud to talk over. I kind of acted like the guide, leaning ever so slightly in the direction I thought home was. And in return she held my arm while I used the other one to hold her stick. She would plunge it deep down into the darkness. Marvellous really, how no longer seeing something instantly makes it mysterious.

I don't think she could understand what I was saying even if I tried, honestly. Without the eye contact, would we even be here?

Something sparked in the back of my head. Doubt and fear were seeping out of the amygdala. *This is impossible. Don't you find this too convenient.* My legs started to tremble. Stop it! If this beast can smell fear, just stop shaking please just-

The face of Master Benjamin spoke to me again. He looked sad, insulted as always but somehow different. Not because he wasn't real. Within the dark circles shadowing his eyes, was a look of regret that simply didn't suit him. "This isn't what I wanted, Crow. Remember as long as you live then I bleed within you. Your instincts and my experience makes...?"

*An unstoppable force.* Yes that's exactly what he would say right now.

I held on to the staff tighter, inching my way up whenever a wave crawled too high for my liking, muttering "unstoppable"

under my breath repeatedly. We trekked roughly four kilometres in one direction before getting to shore.

I honestly had no fears of planting my feet on something solid, even sand. Until the rain got the tiniest bit heavier, and I could see the hail bounce off something taller than the ground.

### 3 - Two Wrongs

Guards were expecting us, lined up in a semi-circle formation armed with uniform spears pointed directly at us, rainwater bouncing off their shoulderplates. At least a hundred had been waiting all night, despite the storm. I remember wanting to throw up again. *Why couldn't I protect us? Why was I nothing like Master Benjamin...without him I've let my guard down and given my trust to a complete stranger, just to lose everything.* Thunder boomed a few hundred paces away. *Calm down. There has to be a way to escape, maybe if we go back into the sea, then they couldn't follow us in their armour and—*

“I said CALM DOWN.”

My Lantern was glowing yellow through the cracked sides. The first time I'd heard it speak.

The wind was picking up, thrashing through the pine trees like a herd of bulls, making an unbearably loud whistling sound as it grazed against the oceans. If we even tried to head back then we'd be subject to a hundred spears flying towards us, and by the most trained killers in the world nonetheless.

*Would they really have sent so many men to capture just me? Why am I that much of a threat? I never committed a crime!*

Lantern had had enough of my tension. It grabbed me with its free hand and flung me into the air far above the guards. The first wall reacted as if it were an attack and began lunging forward at the same time. And that's when the wind really picked up. Looking down I could see all the spears bending to the side. Noone could hold on in this wind. My tears of fear had merged with the rain on my cheeks. It was too much pain to bear knowing this innocent creature was at death's palm because of my poor foresight.

And I was so powerless. The fear of falling has taken over me. *My wings would tear apart if I dared open them...but maybe that was my only option. But even if I could endure the pain, even if I could hit the ground and live...how would I get us free from the guards?*

A strong gust started spinning me back towards the fight. And then I saw it all in a moment of clarity.

None of the guards were watching me. As far as they knew, I could fly away at any moment. They may have never even noticed me, from the coast, all they saw was my Lantern, a witch walking on water in the eye of a storm.

The backline of guards had huddled behind the town walls.  
*Where was the front line? Had their formation broken?*

As I was getting closer to the ground, I could make out glints of Lantern bouncing off their helmets, knocking them away with its staff one by one. A guard flew over my head screaming, looking me in the eye, silently begging for help.

A blueish bolt of lightning fell next to us, stealing our bravery. We dared not even breathe. This heat was strong but not threatening to me in the slightest. I could watch it trickle down below then fork along two perpendicular directions, cracking through the air like whips.

The next moment was silence. Had I been grounded then maybe it would be boots on sand, men rustling through the grass in a stealthy retreat. A staff flew into my vision. I was able to grab it just in time for Lantern to swing me up from my fall.

There was the darkness, the sea, and the coast littered with bodies. I could see the man falling behind me, but he made no sound when he fell. I like to believe the sand cushioned his fall. Why I couldn't begin to count the number of bodies lying there, staining the sand black. Instead my fear turned to the creature, my lantern, unable to realise the danger I'd been wrapped up in.

It didn't even turn to me. Just spoke,  
“Parley.”

Nothing felt stranger than to wander around the streets again, although it was but for a while, and to find some shelter from the rain. It was the company that was strange, my beloved master...replaced by *that*. Somewhere down the lane was an overwhelming stink of ripe, moist manure. So we followed my nose to a wooden barn. Fortunately the inside bar wasn't securing the inside of the door, meaning whoever owned it had exited out the front and was unlikely to find us until the morning or later. Lantern rolled the door to the side along a worn groove in the

floor. I made sure to shut it from the inside too.

All the animals were ignorant of us, supposedly mesmerised by the pattering rainfall. You couldn't see a single soul but the slow, heavy breathing of dozens of pigs and horses assured me they were there.

"Have you ever heard the term "parley"?" Lantern asked, making itself comfortable on the impossibly prickly straw.

*I watched in silent horror, staring at her fingers worming their way towards hidden warmth within the straw. My head was ready to explode from having too many questions, just don't look more desperate than her, pet.*

"It means to swap information, right well I don't know where to start with you."

Lantern smiled kindly, looking me in the eye for the first time, though it was staring dead ahead like she could see all the way through to my soul.

"Why are they after you?"

I brazenly mirrored it exactly. This was going to be a *bargain* or by my word I'd be haunted by my Benjamin's ghost.

"I escaped from jail."

"Well, why were you in jail?"

"They wanted information off me," I grinned. "Just like you."

I stared fiercely as her eyelids drooped. *My turn.*

"You control the weather?"

Its eyes gleamed like hot steam.

"Yes." came the shameless reply.

It was letting me know my closed-off behaviour had offended. Information was off the table, so to speak.

"You should have let them live so they would leave us alone, what you don't realise is what they'll say is you're a witch!"

"That doesn't bother me," it replied. "But no. I'm not a witch and you will call me either she, her or Dima."

Henceforth I would. *She* hadn't flinched or relaxed. Definitely telling the truth...so what was there to hide?

"How can you be so incredibly...stupid?" I spat. "When their commander hears that a *witch* has arrived that killed not one, but two men in the middle of the night, he's going to have enough authority to send everything he's got at us! The whole bleeding planet will have our heads by morning!"

The insult had hit hard. Her eyes grew wide with rage, there was absolutely no way she had been expecting that from me. But then they dimmed down. Something I did must have relaxed her unknowingly.

"I can see how mad you are," she said. She leant forward and lowered her voice into a growl, unfurling her arms. "Do not forget that no matter how strong our bond goes I would never hesitate to slaughter you should I ever feel threatened by you."

I leaned in deeper than she had, practically standing up. "You're not going to kill me. If you wanted me dead you'd have snapped my neck by now! I know your type! You've already judged me. And guess what? I'm the only person in the world that's on your side."

"If I met someone who would help me once it would happen again!" she bellowed.

"I'm the only one who's ever been to the island!" screamed I. The light faded from her eyes.

I leant back, victorious. "You needed my sense of direction to get here in the dead of night. If you kill me, you have to trust someone else. And by now everyone is afraid of you. They'll find out where you live and hunt you down like it was their destiny!"

Her hair flopped to the side and she warded the rain off her face. Clearly she trusted me on a physical level, but I couldn't tell if I'd earnt any respect. When I looked straight in her right eye I saw her gratitude in an unseen smile. I had been found innocent.

If we were as similar as it seemed, then back when we were surrounded, she must have felt the same pressure to act. She must have felt the presence of doubts seeping into us, even considered abandoning me! But for some reason she chose her instincts, to protect, to kill for me. She knows me as a prisoner, but still saw

me as no threat compared to the guards. Even so, she still smiled at me, head lopsided, lips pursed and heart doubtful. There was plenty of room for betrayal in each of us, so she decided to question my innocence.

“Mr. Lantern, I have a question regarding your innocence. Why do you believe they will kill us so quickly?”

My face twitched with anger.

“They weren’t here to kill me, just you.”

Then I hung my head sighing.

“It’s what happened to my master. His name was Benjamin and they killed him as soon as they had the chance.

“They tricked him, you know. They gave him a damning stale roll of bread after rotting him for weeks.”

Dima looked puzzled. “Sorry, I’m not sure I understand the bread?”

That puzzled me even more. I truly knew nothing about this woman. If I had to trust her, I had to predict her. Then this was the time to trade.

“How long have you been on that island?”

She leaned back, chewing a piece of straw. “I’ve lived there all my life.”

I sat bemused. *So she isn’t a rebel.* But it was just impossible to believe. Right then and there my plan unfolded. *I’m going to tell you everything. I’m going to trust you until I catch you lying.*

“Master Benjamin was a writer. He chose to write books after being dismissed from the king’s army for losing his temper with his squad during training. He also wrote rule one-hundred-and-fifty-one.”

“What’s rule one-hundred fifty one?”

“It’s going to take me a while to tell you all the rules.”

I gave an exasperated sigh.

“The founders of our country wrote laws for the people to abide by. Rule one says that all men must follow the laws, written by our first king. Rule two, the laws are to be for the betterment of the country. Rule three, at the age of fifteen, men may write their own rule on the pillars.”

“Wait, stop, what does this have to do with your master’s death?”

“Please don’t interrupt me.”

“You mean for me to sit here listening to five hundred rules!”

I snorted.

“There are only three hundred and seventy. When my master turned sixteen he went to write his law. He said the best day of his life was climbing up the mountain to the pillars of one-hundred-and-fifty laws.

“You bow to an elderly blind man who blesses you with wisdom. Then he gives you a chisel to scribe your law into a boulder the size of the moon. And his law was to ensure that everyone who makes a law retains the right to choose their trade.”

I started playing with the hay on my side, wrapping it around my fingers. Dima took it as her chance to interrupt me.

“What law did you make?”

“I haven’t made one,” I retorted, “I’m not a man.”

Dima blushed with offence. “I know, we have assholes in my world too. Why do you have to follow the rules if you’re not a man?”

“Why, what’s the point of a rule if noone follows them?” I snapped. “Will you let me talk or not?”

“Earlier this month, someone wrote the law saying ‘Do Not Eat’.”

Dima looked at me, her expression shifting from offended to interested. It seemed as if she had forgotten how to blink.

“So what did you do?”

“We stopped eating.”

She stared further.

“You have a law saying you can’t eat? That you choose to obey?”

“That’s why they killed Master Benjamin.”

It was clear Dima didn’t believe me. She kept touching her head, flicking and shaking it.

“Doesn’t that mean everyone’s going to die?”

“Aye, most people. It’s the wealthy ones that are going to live off wine and beers for years from now.”

“And if you eat...the king kills you?”

I nodded.

Dima was too confused to argue. “Will they kill a beast just for eating too?”

“Only the ones that can understand the rule.”

“Well it's no wonder he's paranoid then. He's borderline insane!” Dima laid back grumpily, pondering my situation.

“So you have to change the law to fix this,” she muttered, “Doesn't the king have some kind of weakness?”

I smiled with ridicule. “Only our one of a kind lightning warrior. All the men are the same. *Terrified of you.*”

Dima stopped thinking and uttered with baited breath, “What do you mean one of a kind?”

I scratched my head confusedly. It was clear I'd said something horrible without meaning to. You could almost see the air grow cold the tighter she held her breath.

“Noone else controls the weather?”

She snapped at me angrily, fire in her breath.

“Not that. What do you mean they're all the same?”

“I'm baffled, what else would they be?”

“Do you mean to tell me I'm the only woman?”

I just couldn't understand how she could not know. Why, to this very day it still haunts me.

“Where are the women and children?”

She grew angry at my bemusement.

“The people like me, where are they?”

“There is noone like you! I'm sorry but I've only heard of witches from Master Benjamin's stories and—”

“I am not a witch!” She screamed in the darkness. She got up quite abruptly and stormed out into the rain.

My ankles clicked themselves back into position, crying for mercy, flapping in my sprint to catch up with her as fast as I could. *Curses, she's far faster than I am.* Bright lights began to burst through the house windows.

“You're going to wake up the whole blinking town!”

Suddenly I couldn't hear her footsteps anymore. She must have gone to the beach. By the time I arrived she was crouched over the two dead soldiers. Dima had taken off their helmets and knelt down at their side. The blood had long left their faces, leaving behind a soft, pale mask, all emotions relinquished from the depths of the helmet's shadows.

I finally stumbled over there out of breath and rested my

aching feet. Dima ran her fingers over the collar, feeling what letters had been engraved.

“Ber-trude...they look like brothers.”

I panted furiously trying to understand her mind.

“You don’t even bury your dead brothers.”

I looked up at her again. The rain was easing up. I could see the clouds getting lighter and more spaces out.

“Dima, do you really think there’s more people like you out there.”

“Well...”

She looked ready to explode. Her muscles were tensed so hard it seemed as if her eyes would roll out.

“There has to be!”

She turned to me, looking me in the eye with the one that could show fear, “I can’t be the only one.”

Her eyes flickered behind me.

“Hide.”

She shoved me flat behind the dead body, Bertrude. A clanging of knights was suddenly audible less than a mile away.

“If we get separated, trust me and meet at the stable.”

Looking back, it was a classic Benjamin plan, no time so that we’d never get caught in case it was a trap.

“Don’t kill anyone else just—”

“HIDE!”

The fire in her body wasn’t just out of anger for my ignorance. She was crouched down on one knee, judging the area, resembling a wild cat in the street at dawn, readying to bare her fangs and pounce. This was primal fear taking over her body. I’d gotten through to her and she was prepared for the worst.

If we ran, they’d know this part of town better than either of us, so there was no way we could risk an ambush. Worse still if we ran into more guards...

So...hide or fight. Dima wasn’t hidden so she was ready to fight. I hobbled back behind the rocks on the shoreline, poking my head out for the best seat in the house, wincing as the shells cut into my hard skin. This time was different though. Why had I left Dima crouched there, alone and afraid? The rain had almost stopped and Dima wasn’t glowing in the slightest this time around.

It reeked of surrender. She was running, leaving me behind.

“Halt!”

The guards lined up on the beachfront in a formation of three lines so that those on the outside held up torches, revealing Lantern in her frozen crouch. I thought back, there's never been a time where she seemed less threatening. If you're anything like me, you're copying my techniques, just like you taught me to copy yours. It would take hundreds more energy to overcome this battle. There were more guards than we could see on the road, and probably more coming round the sides. It was starting to make sense...her battle instinct knew that we would always be fighting outnumbered. Simply, we had to make sure that was their last advantage. Every time they tried to surprise us we could counter. Even though I am winded and broken, she seemed to believe anyone that could live could be an asset.

I picked up one of the spiral shells by the side and fitted it into my mouth. I knew the species as "Screaming Shells". Master Benjamin had always kept mementos like these ever since his childhood. Every opportunity he had was taken to demonstrate the majesty of his trinkets. So when I breathed deeply into it, my breath funneled into a single stream of cold air aimed directly at Dima's head. An ear-splitting screech so loud I could watch her eye wince shut in pain. She instinctively lowered her jaw to make it look like the sound was coming from her. And we could watch the guards flinch in unison, swaying their torches back in fear of the one they called witch. Not only that, but also the fearful scream of more men on the opposite side of me. An ambush could only be coordinated by someone intelligent, a captain which they would obey without hesitation...

The man who appeared boldest was the one at the front that had both dared open his helmet's mouthguard and also dared speak to us. But he flinched just like the others, relieving me of my fears.

Now, if I were you what would I be thinking? Does the rumour of a witch make your armour shiver? Have you ever been in such a dangerous situation in your life? I know now for a fact that all you want is to protect yourselves. Your hesitation is but an

admission of your doubt. Your only option is to kill...but there's no chance for that against a threat of completely new proportions.

“I refuse to kill you!”

Dima screamed into the air. She then stood onto her feet, leaving her staff, her only weapon on the sand.

“I am worthy of leading you. Escort me to your border!”

“The kingdom demands that you halt—”

“I demand the attention of your kingdom's head! Nothing more.”

Nothing happened. The guards stood in silence, as if they were awaiting an order. This man must be a tactician. Any power he once had was crushed upon sighting Dima. I understand now that she had planned ahead all this time, the deaths of these two men were sacrifices to pay for offending her. Our only intention had been to prove innocence. So these deaths were a trade for our cause to be heard. She had found a way to be taken seriously.

*Shivers ran down my spine...has she done this before? How many people has this woman murdered to get what she wants? What was she willing to do? If she would kill innocent people for a stranger she believed in, I couldn't begin to imagine what she would do for herself...*

I let my nerves take over me. *Everything is so perfectly thought out. Noone will stop her. What if she is only helping me...because she has something far greater in mind?*

We marched between at least two hundred soldiers.

“I have to say, this is only the second time I've been escorted by the army and I can't say I've grown too fond.”

Dima scoffed, “Just be grateful they have evolved beyond cuffs and sacks.”

“I still don't care for being herded.” I said with a heavy sigh.

My moaning failed to help do anything but waste time.

It wasn't long before we arrived at a large isolated manor. All the lights were on, signalling that we were expected guests. As we got closer, we noticed there was a tall man attending the entrance of an archway, wearing a plain cream suit. Yet another person I instantly wanted to get away from. When we approached he

didn't speak or move. He just kindly looked us each in the eyes then looked away into the distance, sincerely bowing his head, beckoning us to follow him. Inside was an antique hallway. What surprised me was the oak flooring. Dima stepped in and hesitated, her footstep echoing around the corners. This felt like a trap. She unstrapped her staff and carried us inside.

We walked around the corner. The ceilings were so high they looked like they were in the distance. Then there was the dining room which set my heart racing. I'd been so nervous that my senses had become impaired, but as soon as I saw the table I made the connection to the smell. It was laden with food. Arms and arms and arms long. One table leg even had vines wrapped around it, growing from within its foot at that. I saw plates with bread and pork, tubs of braised beef and soups, bottles of rich wine glowing in the candlelight seated along polished flutes and moulding cheeses. By the smell of it, only some was beginning to rot.

Dima whispered softly, "Remember your master?"

*Are you insulting my memory?* I glared back confused but saw her eyes were darting back and forth. Instead of longing, she was scared. I gripped her shoulder firmly to reassure her...but why? Why would the food make her think of him? Why would you be scared at-

Then I remembered. Trying to think like Dima had bridged a connection between my memories. Dima hadn't been so wary of me since I told her how my master had died. She fears death, so she fears the army, the violence. I had weakened her with my stories enough to make her doubt herself. Back when she lacked the energy to fight, it was because of me. For someone trying to learn as much as possible, there was so much I didn't know about this woman. I didn't know how her powers worked, how they affected her, what its limits were...was I letting Master Benjamin down?

She wanted to remind me the food was a trap. Once I started eating I would be classed as an enemy of the law, just like Master Benjamin. *Wait...does that mean?*

Dima marched alongside the man in the suit and allowed him to seat her, gently tucking in her chair. I stood alone, gaping wide while she began serving herself and tasting everything in sight.

“Please, help yourselves.”

I had failed to notice a balcony behind us, we were being watched the whole time. There was even a semi-spiral of stairs leading up to a tall dark figure. He became much clearer once he came down the stairs, another young gentleman, this one in a hard green bowler hat and black leather gloves stemming from a thick coat gliding through dusty air.

At first I wondered if it was a trap, a distraction to lower our guard and kill Dima, the killer witch, the biggest threat the world has ever seen. But it wasn't possible. Looking at Dima shovel fork after fork of hash down her gullet, I doubt her guard could get any lower. This didn't feel like a trap anymore. The insanity was genuine.

Noone bothered to greet him as he smiled down from above. I stood sternly, refusing to let my guard down despite my teammate chewing like a beast at its cage.

“You must be the witch.”

Neither of us wanted to answer that.

“Merlot?”

The butler stepped forward off the wall proceeding to pour Dima a glass of the viscous red liquid.

“It's important to drink it slowly, you don't want to overwhelm your brain with bitter alcohol.”

Dima swallowed, “I will drink as fast as I please.”

She then tipped the entire glass into her mouth all the while looking the gentleman dead in the eye.

But he just kept smiling. He waved a finger in a circle twice making the butler refill Dima's glass once more plus a second for whom I now deemed the owner of the house. He picked up the fresh glass and deeply inhaled the fumes.

“If you like I could summon the king here for you.”

Dima began chewing again.

“Maybe you haven't realised yet, I have absolutely no idea who you are. May I assume you're one of the king's chefs?”

He just smiled, chuckling with his mouth closed. Dima had struck a nerve, insulting both his fame and rank at once. Even more unnerving was the fact that he didn't so much as flinch making it seem that he held so much resentment after being belittled by someone that made Dima's words seem feeble.

“Amazing. So it seems you’re exactly who you appear to be.” He sneered. “An uncultured swine, some beast that crawled out their cave too early.”

He leaned forward. “You want more food?”

His cockiness had gotten the better of me. Watching Dima chew non-stop bridled me with rage but before I could intervene the butler spoke in a crisp, blunt manner.

“Please allow me to introduce the Lord of the manor and the Zonzer parish, Lord Ibaad.”

Dima smirked satisfied, wiping her mouth and resting her cutlery. “How may I assist you, Lord Ibaad?”

“All I want to know is what motivates you. If you’re not here to murder, why did you bother coming all this way?”

Dima quietly pushed her plate to the side. It was time to lock horns. “You’ve asked a lot of questions, Ibaad. Tell me something.”

Lord Ibaad’s smile started pulsing.

“Anything.”

“Now see here.” Dima stood her finger on the table like a dagger. “I wouldn’t think someone with the title of Lord would be so revered by a king and his country. Maybe it’s my intuition, but I’d like to know what rule you created.”

The smile faded from Ibaad’s face.

“Tell me and I’ll answer everything you know.”

“Unfortunately I can’t answer that question too well. I haven’t written my law yet.”

And there it was. In Dima I saw my Master Benjamin’s shadow. She had caught her prey.

“I thought it was against the law to lie.”

Silence fell across the room.

“Do you mean to tell me you never wanted to write a rule? To abide by Rule 2? Making the country a better place?”

“Lord Ibaad. I believe in destiny. And the path I can see leads directly to you. It would not have brought me here if you were not the one who wrote Rule Two-fifty.”

Everyone’s eyes were opened wide. I had tensed my legs, ready to jump if anyone so much as stepped too close to Dima. The butler was stood behind her, looking at the wine bottle with one hand behind his back possibly concealing a weapon. Lord

Ibaad rested his hands on the dining chair on his side of the table.

“So you’re here looking for proof?”

Dima slowly stood up and the room darkened. All the windows were shadowed by a dark cloud coming at full speed.

“I’d rather not clean up someone else’s mess.” She lowered her voice, visibly tensing her wrist.

Dima picked up a plate with an unstable yellow flan that seemed to struggle as it slipped off the plate only to splatter its insides across the table.

But the lord still didn’t move. He seemed almost entertained. The smile crept back onto his face, too wide to hide his teeth anymore.

“They say many things about the new witch. That she can control the weather. That she dances with lightning and kills without hesitation.”

Dima smiled back politely. “She’s also not a big fan of the rules.”

Lord Ibaad pulled his chair out with a sigh and sat. “I suppose that bird is the strategist of you two.” One by one he propped his feet onto the dining table and stretched. “The truth is that you’re not a witch.”

My heart stopped. This man had more knowledge than me.

He reached into his pocket. Out fell a simple clock on a chain.

“Do you really think you’re the only one?”

The butler crawled under the table. Lightning struck through the house window. I didn’t even have time to react. Before the glass even hit the floor Dima was gone. I found myself alone with these two.

## 4 - Storm Chasers

All I could do was run. I found myself jumping back from the smashed window giving little care to its fragments, and made a break back to the entrance. The door had no handle, but it was latched too high for me to reach. It rattled harshly, warning me outside would be a much bigger danger to me.

I couldn't fly to reach it with my wings in this condition. *Think Crow, think!* Dima's staff seemed to speak to me out of the corner of my eye. I grabbed it immediately only to collapse. The blasted thing was as heavy as I was. *They must have heard you falling, hurry!*

Somehow I managed to drag the staff up to the door, then slide the staff up against the wall to stand it on its base and wiggle it upwards, unhooking the latch. The wind blasted it open, knocking me backwards. If the Lord hadn't heard my first fall, and just maybe not seen me leave in the explosion, he was most surely on his way to me now.

It took all my might, every single muscle, to keep one arm clenched around her staff while dragging the rest of my body away from the house with the other, waving it around to straighten the arm before bending it and digging deep in the carpet to find some grip to pull another pace.

Deafening rain poured from the sky soaking me instantly. I found myself cursing my wing repeatedly. *Just keep going. Just don't get caught.*

I looked back at the house. A dark figure was stood in the doorway watching me. All of the lights had gone out, the wind had probably snuffed them. It took me far too long to realise why noone was chasing after me. The sky flashed to day and a second lightning bolt crashed right before my feet. It burned my eyes as if it would melt them, but it was for a moment, then it was gone as if it never happened.

*Lord Ibaad, this man, has Dima's power. He's another witch.* Although it wasn't windy like when Dima was fighting, I stood no chance of surviving out here. But even Dima had stood no chance inside. Our combat skills meant nothing so long as Ibaad got the first strike. I looked around. On the right was the road heading back up the hill that we came down. The other side

sloped downwards. And straight ahead were the fields. Somewhere I could hide.

Back at the town the sun had just started to rise, dyeing the sky a bright grey in its stead. Damp and swollen, I decided there was nothing better to do than begin searching for a new shelter, until nightfall. As I started circling the outskirts, it occurred to me that mapping the town would be a more important task that could be done today. Instinctively I headed for the cliffs at the beachfront. The incline is barely noticeable. I guess it felt like any other day. *Just don't stop thinking.*

There's an old forest on the path curving around town. It's more stumps than forest this time of year. Still I found one of the remaining pine trees, deciding to climb it for a bird's eye view.

“Don't you move.” I swore bitterly at the staff, then hesitated to cover it with a few planks of broken rotten bark and a nice-looking pile of leaves.

But when I looked up, my body half gave up on me right there and then. What kept me going was thinking of the view I would have. A memory I could have as a treasure for the remainder of my days. Benjamin's words echoed in every grunt, giving me strength as I dug my fingers into the ridges to heave myself up.

“When I see treasure I can't help myself. I want it. I keep it.”

Nothing seemed bleak anymore. I've made Ben proud, I have Dima's staff!

“I got my first treasure!” I squealed excitedly. “Two treasures, two treasures!”

Within a matter of seconds I was higher than the cottages. Before long my body wouldn't listen to my brain. I just kept climbing, keeping my eyes fixed on the top. The next thing I knew, I had it. A view of the town and more. I could easily make out the sun behind the clouds now, in the east was the beach we landed on, and man sized boulders where they had ambushed us. Beyond that was the drowning peninsula I injured myself on. One of the buildings further north was the farm Dima told me to

meet her at should we ever get separated. But I couldn't see past the rest of the town. The west had managed to maintain a blue sky over the hill I had just mounted. People were leaving the city off horseback, but not entering. By the looks of things, this town was marked dangerous. Within a week the entire kingdom would hear and an entire army could arrive.

“I guess if we head north we can escape them all.” I muttered aloud.

In the south was only more sea and a deserted harbour. Listening to the waves alone let them rock me into a sound sleep. Actually, that's the first time I slept since he died.

Only the heavens know what I dreamt of, but when I woke, I woke with a plan. It was still daytime. I clambered back down the tree and headed south. At the docks there was smoke rising from a cabin with two men quarrelling inside.

“Blast it all!”

“Watch your tongue, mate!”

“Ease off!”

They weren't wearing armour. I could feel the quay bend and croak every time one of them got shoved into a wall.

“ENOUGH!”

Silence caught everyone's tongue. A big, burly boss began pacing between the two warriors.

“I'll pike your heads afore I hear one more blather of your blasted stupidities!

“Law is law! We're all bleeding our gizzards into the dragon's belly, so I'll tell you all you've got two options. Take the rum and take it quietly or take your blasted heads to the king! He'll be del-”

“Help!”

I could sense them all stare through the door towards me.

The boss started cursing from inside.

“Answer it then!”

Out came the three henchmen half-naked and stinking worse than the horse pats.

“Noone's here!”

“If you're telling me that my ears are worse than yours I'll toss you right into the bottom of a dead ocean!”

Out came the last man. He wielded a massive cutlass in the padded glove of his wide suit of armour. He didn't seem the type to fit a helmet on his large bald head.

“What!” he bellowed.

“Good evening gentlemen.”

They all spotted me sitting casually on the roof.

“What in the seas are you playing at?”

“Parley?”

All of them became confused at once.

“You stopped our drinking for nought?”

Clearly these men were in a foul enough mood. They followed suit back into the cabin, stomping. I had to dash to slip in before the heavy door would slam me in my face.

Inside were two chairs, both occupied, and various cluttered weapons and fishing gear. I couldn't believe how many swords a man could need. They must be traders if only one seemed to know how to use them

“You'll want to speak now.”

“You don't seem so surprised to see a talking bird.”

“You know who he is? Balt's seen absolutely everything.” boasted the henchman closest to me.

I decided to take that as an introduction.

“Well then, I'm here to offer information.”

“Save it!” the captain screamed. “Don't you see these men are starved? Information, what in the world could we do with it?”

“Have you heard of rule two-fifty?” I suggested.

“ARE YOU DAFT?” he screamed again, punching the wall for dramatic effect. I had to wait for a while for him to finish cursing me and my brains before he ran out of air and downed the rest of his cup in frustration.

“I know the witch that wrote it!”

None of them had anything to say to that. Rather they dropped their jaws, baring their toothless smiles at me.

“What's the bounty?”

“What's a bounty?”

Balt flipped out again at me. “What are you exchanging you twit?”

“I just want you to bring the witch to justice.” I purred.

He stared back with a glass eye drooping the wrong direction. “Now there’s where I smell a rat. Do we look like police to you?” he sneered.

“You’re using us to deliver the justice instead, now that’s fishier than a whale’s belly.”

“Aye it stinks Balt.” The pirate that had sat silently next to Baltimore raised his voice.

I did my best to dismiss their assumptions behind a false grin.

“Police? They’re afraid of the witch.”

I thought to tell about the battle that had killed them, but then thought against it. “It’s going to take less than a week before the king hears what’s happened here and then we’re all dead, either to him or the men hunting him down.”

The first one nodded his approval.

“Aye a right mess.”

Baltimore stood hanging his head.

“So you’re saying if we were to wait til after the storm’s all blown over we’d more likely be capsized a mile from home?”

“No Balt, he said we’re gonna die no matter what!”

“That’s exactly what I said, you worm!” Baltimore bellowed, kicking the mate off his chair. Each time was sounding less aggressive though.

“Tell us then. You said the witch wrote it?”

“Rule two-fifty was written by Lord Ibaad a week ago. He waited to write it at the last moment. Not only that but he started the storm yesterday at his own manor.”

Balt picked up his drink and chucked it right above my head. I jumped away from the shrapnel exploding behind me.

“That fiend!” Balt raged.

“We’ll have the Watch keep an eye out to see him do it next time for proof?” asked the first henchman.

“No, you incompetent div! Witnesses aren’t enough against a lord! We’ll need a confession to the king himself!”

“Aye and what’s your stupid plan to have the king agree to walk up to a witch?”

“Bite it!” Balt screamed again, somehow forgetting to hit something.

“We’re to capture Lord Ibaad in exchange for our freedom to

eat then.”

His eyes glinted in the fireplace as he chucked one of the books on his table into it. “I know your type lad. You’re the goat to make trouble for us whenever we climb a mountain.”

I looked back numbly, wondering what I had done wrong.

“There’s a lot of risk, telling tales of *corruption*. Any witch that lets you live after seeing *that* is beyond a fool. And I don’t trust this lord to be a fool. What’s more is that if you’re lying, then we’ll be the ones that are hanged for getting off our asses!”

They all started to look uneasy. The one on the floor picked himself up. The two others started straightening their backs.

“You’d be happy to accompany us of course, being so desperate to see him in justice’s light?”

That wasn’t a question.

“I can attend you in the day, of course.”

“Nonsense.” the first henchman spoke with coerce.

“We’ve enough floor space and rum to share, don’t we lads?”

Balt stepped in closer.

“There’s a lot about a man with something to hide. I’d say he’s hiding something *treasurable*, boys.”

The staff popped back in my mind. What if they followed me back to the tree and took it?

“I’ve actually got someone expecting me to return home safely.” I stuttered.

“Nonsense.” they chorused.

Balt smiled cunningly. “Why, they have no reason to worry, less of course, should they *have* some reason to worry.”

Now I was the one cursing under my breath. Dima should be waiting for me in the stable tonight. I couldn’t leave her there waiting. But these men would kill me if they thought that she matched her rumoured description.

Balt gently stroked my chin without cause. “You know what I hate more than false hope, Crow? Nothing.”

For the next few days I was tranquilised by the crew forcing all manners of vile liquors down my gullet. I still held on tight to my secrets, Dima and her staff. The nights became more and more meaningless. All they would do was drink, swear and argue.

I had no clue what was going on, only that if I didn't open my mouth when ordered someone would tip the fluids down my nose and whinny in delight at my drowning. Balt was the only one who slept while I was awake, I'm assuming he scheduled himself to me. All through the day he seemed deep in thought, so disturbed by reality that he would sometimes wake up swearing, drink half a bottle then pass out again. I was more scared for his death than my own.

Then one day I woke up to him talking over the others in a hushed tone. I could not dare to open my eyes.

“Well he said he controls the weather...” Balt grunted, “...if we're to take him alive we'll have to catch him in a trap! Then by the time he's drowned in rum he won't have time to think!”

“Aye and if he's brought inside of a place then there'll be no way to fight back, the coward.”

The henchman closest to the door was called Rupert, according to the drunk screaming.

“And how are we to trap him?” scoffed the third. This one was Daniel.

“I've got ears telling me that his house was damaged by the storm.” Balt sniggered. “You can handle him when we get there Mister Daniel.”

“Oy he's awake!”

There was no point in pretending any longer. I opened my eyes to the nauseating fumes and it's captives.

Balt smiled gingerly. “What do you say then?”

“I don't know exactly what you're planning.” I mumbled. They all sniggered menacingly.

“Why then that makes this the perfect time. Get up lads!”

I ended up being dragged back to the hill on foot by a chain.  
“Rupert! Keep him here!”

Rupert sulked as they abandoned him here to watch. Clearly the violent type, he did seem bored without it.

We lay on the ground watching the manor. Daniel hid around the left corner with a cutlass while the other two knocked on the door, holding a wheelbarrow of lumber.

“See? They'll be distracting while the other one jumps in and

kills them!" Rupert chuckled.

"I thought you wanted to keep him alive for a reward?"

"Aye that too." Rupert looked me up and down.

"I don't reckon it'll happen though!" he laughed hysterically.

I thought about it. Of course the butler would answer the door, but what if Lord Ibaad was upstairs again? Would he manage to escape them? Wait. Daniel had disappeared. When the butler opened the door I spotted what appeared to be a bush slither to the side that had a hole in the wall. How had he managed to disguise himself so quickly?

"You really ought to take the butler hostage should noone else be home."

Rupert grimaced. The look on his face seemed so familiar. Though we both knew how to respond to a master, that meant there was no way room for a second voice.

"If the lord had left, why then that would mean he has something to hide." His eyes glowed an unnatural white.

"Only a fool could choose to be weak right now. Once they find him we'll have the butler as bait, maybe dangle him so that Mister Lord confesses nice and easy."

Rupert just didn't blink. He stared menacingly right through me.

"And if you're lying...we'll let him join in the fun." he giggled.

My body started to boil. "I'm not lying. I'm a loyal citizen of—"

"Maybe your ears don't work." He grumbled, turning right to face me and leaning in closer. "Let me paint you a very pretty picture."

"You're the one that said there's a witch, it's all any man around will talk about. People aren't following the laws anymore."

Rupert plucked a blade of grass, twisting it around his finger.

"When I see a stray blade, I see we're not all the same. If one of us can stray, maybe all of us can."

He dropped the dead grass. It thudded like a limp stone on the others.

"You think I'm a witch?"

Rupert chuckled looking down for another way to explain

his twisted mind.

“A witch can have allies,” I said. For now I just want to know if you’re plucked or not.”

The sun glinted in his eyes as he turned back to the house. It took me a moment to realise that he wasn’t talking about Dima. They were scared, preparing for a scenario that involved me working with Ibaad.

“I’m here to defeat him!” I blurted. “Are you stupid enough to think I’d work for him when he’s killed people and tried to strike me down with the heavens? Even my dearest friend was taken from me! He’s going to kill us all!”

But Rupert wasn’t interested. Words didn’t mean a lot to someone like that.

“You’re like me, Crow. You live for a captain. You know ours but we don’t know yours.”

Tears welled in my eyes.

“I keep telling you. Benjamin Stay was killed by Captain Roland in the royal prison.”

Rupert plucked a fistful of grass. “Aye, and what happens when you have us take the lord captive? Banquets? More rum than we could possibly dream of in a night?

“The police are hungrier than us, you’d have an easier time with ‘em. Yet here you stand, chained to a drunk.”

Something smashed inside the house.

“What sick man would choose to be guilty until proven innocent? Unless of course he knows he’s guilty.”

“No, Lord Ibaad is the one that wrote the rule...”

Rupert unsheathed his dagger. A shark was carved into the iron hilt.

“We know you’re lying about the lord. Pretty soon he’ll march out here himself telling us to execute you. Imagine that reward.”

My heart was pounding. Stealing life from my head. *Just think.*

“Why didn’t you go to the police if you thought I was a liar?”

Rupert tossed the blade up, catching it in his mouth by the hilt.

“Why who knows?” he mumbled with his jaw wide. “Maybe Balt believes your tale.”

“So you don’t?”

He spat out the dagger, balancing it on his fingertip.

“Course not.”

My heart sank. They had been preparing to execute me all along. I silently burst into tears, fearing I would be killed even for talking too loudly. And the second I crumbled, I could no longer think straight. Rupert focused on playing with his dagger while I stared ahead at the manor. *This is the last thing I'll see.*

“You may as well kill me now.”

But Rupert just ignored me, looking up with the dagger blade stood on his tongue.

“I berieve ba your maher hied.” He dropped the knife on the grass between his legs. “Alas he can’t compare to anyone if you’ve already given up on him.”

I took a deep breath.

“He taught me to give up when I can’t win.”

Rupert spat scarlet saliva on the floor.

“Balt ain’t like that. He’d never let us give up. Just like you’re a symbol of Ben, we all represent Balt’s legacy. When he dies, I’ll be twice as venomous as a symbol of respect.”

We watched the clouds pass by in silence. Noone walked past us. We just waited on the road at the hilltop for any signal at all. I hate to admit it but Rupert’s words stuck with me forever. I can’t let anyone remember him like that, a lonely traitor trialled and executed by the King’s own orders? And what did I represent? A broken blade of grass? Bah!

It started to rain quite heavily. Both of us stared into the manor through the gaping hole in the roof.

“Should we go in?”

Rupert scowled and stood up with an uneasy look.

“It looks like he’s going to attack them now.”

“Shut up!” Rupert frowned. I saw the fear in his eyes. His veins began to throb and each drop of rain seemed to irritate him like acid. Low growls echoed from his throat, steam pouring out from it.

“You got lucky last time so you can do it again,” he puffed.

I laughed, bemused.

But rather than respond, Rupert thought it was the perfect moment to exercise vigorously, running laps around the hilltop, dragging a now steadily rusting chain clamped around my leg. I think that jangling noise has traumatised me. It gave me visions, of myself lost in the clouds dodging Captain Roland's giant sword pushing me deeper into the clouds, severing my wings. None of this should have happened. Why, if everyone followed the laws, if killing was truly illegal, I wouldn't have lost everything. This world is cursed. I lost my home, the only family I had, my freedom, my hero, even my last memory of her must be found and stolen by now. When I saw Rupert in his glorious insanity, I only felt the doom, the human curse to hurt me.

My fingers dug deep into the mud. "You're right." I whispered under my breath. "My master was too weak to fight back."

I watched Rupert circle me one last time.

But then the front door burst open. That man's angry bellowing could be heard all the way at the top of the hill.

"Hurry up and move then!" Balt screamed.

All of a sudden the dirt seemed to melt out of my fingers. *Be still. They're trying to help.* Rupert just kept running manically. It wasn't until the trio approached that I noticed Balt had stolen a huge heavy chest, and instead of the third man, it was Ibaad accompanying them on Daniel's back. Something had gone wrong.

"Move it you sorry slabs of lard!" Balt was so hoarse with screaming that he was wheezing as they clambered up the hill. "Give!"

Rupert sprinted up to Balt, handing him the chain, then ran down the path to the town.

"We need to-"

I stopped talking when Balt looked me in the eye from his bulging, bloodshot eyes. "Who in Vulcan's inferno do you think you're ordering you damn little- kerrraa!"

Balt coughed viciously. You'd think he was injured at a glance but if you were there you'd know to relish any moment of silence he gave you. I didn't dare help him either. Instead I stood patiently waiting for him to catch his breath. Ibaad seemed to be completely unconscious.

Soon a horse-drawn wagon approached, driven by the third man. Noone was inside. Balt hobbled on board first, cursing all the way before angrily throwing his hands at Daniel and I when he saw we weren't rushing. He kept watching the sky both out the back and in front of the horses, looking for the storm that just might bring him down.

## 5 - Death to the King

In all my life I never have, nor shall again, see a beachfront country town be so alive with business. It looked more like a city, people were rushing, bustling, pushing past each other without a second thought. None of them were in uniform, simple leather hides balanced on their shoulders and buckled from the waist down. They were fitted for combat, long enough to cover the main joints without obstructing them. It made me realise how much more secure people in the city were, there can't be much reason for combat there.

Lots of them were queueing outside a very tall square building. I recognised Rupert standing awkwardly in the middle of the road. He signalled for us to park here, then led our horses into a neighbouring stable and beckoned us to file in with the crowd.

“Why ain't you the symbol of perfect luck, Crow?” Mr Balt grumbled, “All according to plan.”

We followed behind him as he barged a path through the crowd.

“Don't take any notice of him, Balt's just heading to rest his fat keister.” Rupert winked.

He promptly dodged a quick glare from Mr Balt, whose ears must have been burning.

Inside it was a much larger stable than the one I had found before with Dima, spacious enough for about two thousand people seated on shortish hay bales. Before long Balt had parked himself next to some poor soul whom of which no longer had the space to sit.

The five of us, including the barely conscious Ibaad, managed to squeeze on the bale beside him. Balt grinned as if he was tasting liquor again. His eye hooked onto his other neighbour's.

“So you've heard the news, eh?”

This new stranger looked anxiously back at our wheezing Mr Balt, avoiding his heated glare. “Aye sir, someone was crying that the witch was caught.”

The grin grew to Balt's ears, revealing his grimy teeth, glistening with his armour. He leaned back comfortably.

“Indeed, he has.”

The stranger's revulsion dissolved into a look of disbelief.

“You're not the ones who caught it...are you?”

Balt burst into a bellow of laughter, clapping his hands together. “In fact, he's truly in your presence.” He gestured back at the dribbling lord. I can't say the stranger shared his enthusiasm.

“You're not serious, are you?

“The witch isn't a man at all! It's a beast that crept out of the ocean last week and it summoned balls of lightning from the sky! The last thing those who died saw, was a head of fire and ash, and the staff of a devil!”

“You saying I'm daft?” Balt menaced.

Smileless. But rather than think, his temper flew and sent him into a frenzy. He swore half a dozen times under his breath then stood, marching right up to the front of the barn, grabbing Ibaad by the collar as if he were a poor slaughtered lamb. It didn't do much for the new strangers' faith for sure.

“Man's a blacksmith, an old "friend" of Balt's.” Rupert whispered.

He seemed to have taken a liken to me, all Balt's men were in much better spirits.

“OY!!!” came the horrid scream.

The crowd grew quiet.

“The beasts of the port have arrived to cure us!” Balt roared. “Our curse is no more! Gents, here, before you is our cursed witch!”

He paused with Ibaad's head in his palm. We didn't know what to expect, but there was not a sound from his audience.

“We caught this man dead in the act! Not only does he control the thunderous elements, he smashed it into the walls of his own manor! The rat thinks he can kill himself to escape our justice! So we've sedated the beast enough to handle him! Don't be alarmed! He can't use them in here, but he'll talk and he'll confess it all.”

Mr Balt threw Ibaad forward, but Ibaad couldn't even hold his own head up. He slipped on the stage and almost slid right off it. As a matter of fact he just looked like another drunken mess.

The crowd started a low murmur of discussion. Quite a few of them had already left, I think out of fear. One stood up to break the silence.

“Liar!”

The crowd cheered angrily in agreement, booing Balt. I looked at Rupert but he was just staring straight ahead with dead eyes, arms folded. I looked past at the other two but they were looking away, twisting backwards to scowl at the “noisy, miserable madmen”. Looking behind me I saw even more getting up to storm off. My heart pounded hard at the thought of what would happen to me once we left.

“He's too short!”

“He's not a menace to me!”

“It's the lord of the parish, you goon!”

I don't know who looked more furious, Balt or Rupert. I definitely had more fear for Rupert, being closer to me.

But what happened next was beyond my predictions. As I looked back to the stage my heart finally gave out. Dima was there. Approaching the stage.

I felt a twisted sort of sick and relief at the same time. As scary as Balt was, he couldn't do anything bad in comparison to Dima. The crowd fell silent just watching her walk into vision. She was different from all of us.

“A monster if I ever saw one!” I could hear our stranger's heartbeat now, the man was struggling to breathe. Her long twisted hair, longer than anyone's that anyone had ever seen, resembled both fire and ash somehow frozen into something solid. Though she was missing her legendary staff, noone doubted her for a second. The stranger began to tremble. I looked back at Balt, who was so busy swearing at the top of his voice that he hadn't spotted her yet. He probably thought the crowd were finally listening to him. Silence crept back in as Dima stood right in front of Balt.

“Wha— WHO THE DEVIL ARE YOU?” he spat, rattling

Ibaad by the neck.

He must have sensed something unworldly from the way she walked, completely ignoring him. I'm betting it's the smallest he's ever felt in his life.

Dima spoke. "Gentlemen, I am your witch. The woman who rose from the sea.

"Do not leave until I finish speaking, or you will die. I am only here to right a wrong. I will leave you all in peace, should you do as I tell you all to do. Firstly, I shall revoke Rule 250. This is to stop you all senselessly dying within the month. You are all too weak and ill-rested to disobey me now. Second, I shall have Lord Ibaad repent. He is also a witch, and as the writer of the cursed rule, I see him ill-fitting of his title."

Everyone stared in silence. Ammonia stunk the room out. The only one grinning now was Ibaad in his lunacy.

"Those are my only wishes. All who are able to shall lead me to revoke this law at sunrise."

She turned her head to scan the room, stopping as soon as her eye met mine. Though her expression didn't change, I know she recognised me, and that we both felt a great sense of relief.

With a slight glance to Mr Balt, she left the stage and headed our way.

So there we were, an odd, fierce crew sat on four haybales. Dima and I, then Balt then his cronies then the half-conscious Ibaad lying on his belly.

Most of the audience were now engaged in deep conversation amongst themselves with a very dampened atmosphere around them. Mr Balt was finally lost for words, gazing through the floor. It was a tense situation for everyone but me. I must have looked happier than I realised because when I looked at Dima she immediately smiled and looked back.

She reached out to pet me gently, overwhelming me with a wave of emotions. Honestly, it was the first pleasant interaction

in what seemed to be a lifetime.

“Take off his cuffs.”

Rupert didn't have to wait for Mr Balt to OK her command.

I took it upon myself to break the silence.

“Dima, I'm really sorry, about your staff. I took it from the house and left it outside and I'm afraid it must be stolen by now.”

My voice wobbled, making me the first to admit anxiety. Imagine my reaction when her expression didn't change in the slightest.

“It's fine, I never needed it.”

She turned to Ibaad whose face was contorted with anguish. He clearly recognised her, even if by voice alone.

“When we were at the house, Ibaad struck me with lightning. It sent me back to the island, like I was taken from the earth and put somewhere else, but only because of who I am.”

Dima hesitated, weighing up the bandits. “What are you planning to do to Ibaad?”

“Well, the plan was to try him once he confessed to us all, then hand him over to the knights.” I chimed. “But then you showed up, so we just need him to revoke Rule Two-Fifty!”

She had a suspicious look in her right eye. It almost seemed to gleam like a torch.

“I see you have enough alcohol to sedate him for a month.”

Balt couldn't hold his tongue. “It's rum, not alcohol, you *witch!*” he spat. “We'll have *you* hanged too soon enough! Mark my words!”

We could all tell Dima was insulted. Her eyebrows slumped over her forehead. Rupert started shaking his leg. Only I knew he was clenching the iron shark knife in his pocket.

“Your laws don't apply to me, *little boy*.” Dima stared back coldly. You could cut the tension with a finger at this point. Balt was growling, swearing under his breath, trying not to stand. But Dima leaned back, crossing her arms completely calmly.

Balt stared back even more viciously. But he didn't stand.

Dima smiled enthusiastically. “Would you like to know what

else I can do?”

Balt spat acid onto the floor by our feet. “Save your nightmares for someone deserving,” he snarled.

Then he leant back, folding his arms. “So we throw this one in a jail then?”

“Only if he’s kept drunk. No jail can hold someone like me.”

Balt scratched at the face under his beard. “So we’re to ration enough alcohol to keep a man drunk now?”

This conversation was boring her. Dima had already made up her mind. Noone, especially not Mr Balt, had the capacity to change it for her.

“Would you rather he caused more chaos?”

*Time to think of something good.* “How did you find us?”

“Honestly, I have no idea.” Dima smiled. “I happened to go to the busiest place tonight and ended up meeting you here. Until now I’ve been waiting in the other barn, like we agreed.”

She looked up at the bandits one more time. “But I can see now that you got *diverted*.”

Balt scowled, massaging the veins on his brow. “I should’ve held onto that vermin myself. So it’s the capital for us then?”

“If you would, that would be ideal considering I can’t complain about the odour.”

“Um, excuse me sirs...”

Our stranger had returned. I almost didn’t recognise him, due to how pale he now looked.

“Your Excellency, I just thought I should say since I can’t join you, but I expect there will be more knights headed over here to erm, handle you after you killed those men earlier. I wish you the best of luck in your journey.”

“What was his name again?” I asked.

“Suds to you!” Balt screamed.

His cronies sniggered, just as he’d expect them to.

“You can tear down another army then, eh?”

“You there!” Dima called for him, ignoring Mr Balt, “Tell me, what have you men been saying?”

The stranger froze looking very uneasy. He cleared his throat but still sounded very timid.

“We’re fearful. You’re questioning our lives, by which I mean the end of them. I don’t think I’d be of any help to you, but even if I was, I would rather die in peace than in a stick or iron.”

This set Rupert off. As he stood, his temper erupted into a blaze of fury. He marched right up to the stranger and screamed in his face, taking out the beloved shark blade.

“Cowardice! You lot are worse than the witches! What man wouldn’t fight for his life? Nothing more valuable in the whole stinking world! I’ll gut you right now if you’re so ready to die!”

A hand grabbed his shoulder. He growled, expecting it to be Dima. But his rage vanished when he saw it was his captain.

“I say what’s to be gutted, not you, you stinking *pig*!” Balt roared.

He ripped Rupert backwards, and the stranger took it as his cue to run away manically, not before bowing earnestly.

“There’ll be two types of man and that’s that.”

Balt sat back on his haybale. He produced a black handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his head.

“We’re all heading to the gallows in the end. They’re all in the same boat as us, don’t forget that. Last thing we need to worry about is having more men to knock us overboard. Leave him be.”

His gaze stuck to Ibaad.

“We’ll take our chances, and theirs.”

One of Mr Balt’s crew hadn’t been able to keep their mouths shut. Before long word had gotten out about Ibaad’s manor, filled to the brim with cooked food. Dima must have been the first to rush back there. I joined in thoughtlessly, gorging on breadcrumbs, munching on juicy, crisp chicken skin. The drunkards had gotten excitable under the breaking of rain, to toast to *change* under the head of the witch. Aye and to mock her face for not smiling in the presence of liquor. Bah, it meant much more to us anyway.

We were finally getting along now Dima had taken charge, singing “Death to the King” merrily all through the night. We felt safer here than we would in the heavens. It was a feast for the whole town to bear. Rule two-fifty was to be revoked, we had broken out more food than we could carry to scoff it down into

oblivion. Life was about to change for the best. And as the sun was rising, something flew out of the forest. Within seconds the singing was smothered by screaming. I recognised Daniel's blood-curdling wild cries. Balt had fallen onto his back. We all thought he was blind drunk until we got close enough to see. An arrow had sunk right through Balt's skull killing him painlessly.

I suppose it was the illusion of peace that betrayed us. Dima and I stared drunkenly at each other. The only sound was a ghastly howl once Rupert realised what had happened. Most definitely the scariest thing I've ever heard in my entire life. It chilled me to the bones.

Noone knew what to do. This sort of thing never happens, the reality of how little I knew started to sink in. Blood started pooling at our feet. Someone was throwing up.

Daniel came running out of nowhere, sobbing. I guess he must have been closest to Balt. "Save him."

Rupert had gone berserk again, running straight to the woods looking for the fire burning a camouflaged line of smoke into the air. Countless men chased after him, joining in the manhunt. Dima just stared at the arrow.

"Save him!" Daniel cried.

Everyone seemed to be staring at us. Her bottom lip began to tremble, refusing to push a single word out. She swallowed, then finally spoke.

"I'm sorry. I can't."

It took some time for me to understand what had happened. "I guess we're now considered enemies of the law."

Dima hadn't said a word. Her face was pale, void of any blood. A worthy look worthy of our so-called witch.

"Where do we bury him, Dima?"

She seemed too stunned to take notice of me. Nothing was working. Suddenly, a fire lit from the pupil of her eye.

"Run!"

Dima grabbed me, dragging me back inside. I didn't understand what was going on at all.

“Wh—”

It wasn't real before a second arrow cracked with the sound of death and one of our men screaming. That's when it hit me; we were *all* under attack. Everyone was being shot down. I wanted to look back but Dima was covering my eyes with her spare hand. Albeit not before I witnessed more men get struck hard from the earth. When her fingers cracked apart it created my most sickening memory; Dima sprinting to the house, her hair flying to the side, the man at the door ushering us in, a man to our side collapsing as an arrow sunk right into his back, knocking him slide through the mud. I managed to close my eyes after that, praying he had fallen unconscious first.

Thousands of town members were being made to repent with their lives, we had all voided the law. If only I had escaped those pirates sooner, if Dima had never met me...then both they and I would have a well-earned, peaceful death instead of this...massacre. If only I had simply died three days ago...

“Drag as many people as you can into here!” Dima screamed at me.

The hammering sound of arrows splintering against brick, I couldn't focus, the world started spinning.

“Look at me, Crow!” Dima grabbed me by the neck staring into her own reflections in my eyes, “Wake up! Save them!”

That's all it took for me to swallow everything. When Dima let go, I felt the grief evaporate into nothingness. She wanted me to help. When I realised I could help...I became like Dima.

By this moment in time I was looking for my second body to drag back into the safe room... War, it's completely primal. I'm never forgetting that moment your body starts moving on its own and you can have your brain focus more. I'm never getting that feeling again.

Ten minutes later, the bombardment had finished. The wounded were being stripped of their armour. Not just to treat them, but to protect the other men, those with a better chance of living. I couldn't even carry in a dozen. When I found myself done, I couldn't find Dima at all. So I did all I could. I screamed to every ally who could hear me, “Death to the King!”

To me, the war had only just begun.

## 6 - Captain Crow and the First Assassin

I turned around to the dimming of laughter. A crowd was gathering in a circle, looking at the floor in astonishment. There was a howl of grief, and I came running.

The man who had announced the witch was laying sprawled on his back with his arms in line with his head. Had he fallen? No. His face was relaxed instead of shocked, and the man kneeled at his side had been taken by grief.

A hand pushed me back just in time for a whistling thing to skim past my cheek. I hadn't even noticed it coming. Was the rain dousing my senses?

I took a look at the man that pushed me back. He was very tall and gruff, shirtless, and the nasty growl he made revealed three missing teeth from the top and bottom of his jaw, each on the left side.

He then let go of my shirt and started racing towards the woodlands. I could now see the faces of the men on his other side. They all stared after him, fierce, unsheathing their weaponry and inspecting the straps on their armour. One by one they followed. This was war. The fight for my life.

I sprinted barely behind the frontline, all of this was the opposite of what I'd expected. Instead of two armies facing off in the valley for a fair fight, we had been ambushed so they could pick us off one by one. We made a good choice to move, scattering from the crowd in silence and shadow.

A sudden sense of danger interrupted my thoughts in the woods. Whoever was running in front of me simply vanished, leaving a faint scream behind. I grabbed onto the nearest tree. Where was everyone going? An eye shifted on the tree's other side, its hazel iris beaming directly at mine. I flinched, lunging at it while simultaneously loosening the blade I had hidden in my glove straps. It was the first time I'd killed. There was a muffled exclamation of surprise, as the iris flickered towards the blade, then collapsed, sliding cleanly to the floor. I only saw its body's shadow drift down into darkness thudding with a scream.

When I looked down after it I was surprised to see a familiar

face. It was the man in front, though the rest of him wasn't visible in the night. We had been trapped.

"Help me..." he croaked.

It was all I could do to survive from then. It felt like every moment someone started shouting from nowhere, then a rustling of leaves would surround it as everyone from both sides would attack it. Most of our comrades hadn't the time to gear up properly. They fought hard in their leather, though the few that had the luck or mind to wear iron could fight harder. This made them much easier to distinguish from the enemy, who all wore suits of a black iron that was perfectly suited for this battle.

I decided to stay in the same spot, not just for my own security, but to stop more men from our side falling into this pit. Whenever I heard the hard, heavy footsteps crush leaves and twigs around me, I pivoted towards it with a powerful stab. A blade is far lighter than a sword, so each time I would only have to prepare for the precision of kill and block the oncoming attack with the blade concealed within the glove on my spare hand.

Someone from the hillside came running with a torch. I quickly halted him to warn him about the pitfalls and without a moment's hesitation he held the torch to the trees, running off to find an enemy for himself.

The fire made the enemy's armour glow dark amber, like two-legged foxes caught in their hunt. There was a yell, and then absolute terror as they just kept coming. It was so much easier for them to see me if I was fighting, they kept pushing me back out the woods, charging at me as soon as they pleased. It took everything I had just to remember; block, attack, block, attack.

They just kept coming...in pairs, in fours. With my back to nothing but trees and bodies, I was forgetting to breathe. *Not now...don't panic now!*

Soon there was a pause. I couldn't hear nor see anyone around me. Inside the pit the man was still there, looking up miserably.

"Let's get you out!" I called.

It must have been a pit that went down at least thirty paces. Because I couldn't reach to pull him out, my strategy was to strip the dead men of their weapons and armour, then to toss them in the pit for the man to climb on top and out. He claimed to have broken both legs, but was able to change into the armour of the first dead man, then bear the pain as each body fell close to him. Finally he reached the top, with a rewarding smile of gratitude.

“You'll get me back to the others, won't you?”

So we carried the crossbows by the wire around his arms, as well as all the bags of bolts, with his arms wrapped around my shoulders.

As we approached the manor, there was a shift in the wind that made me look back. You couldn't see the glow of the fires from here at all. Just a thick black smog rising from it eerily. I thought back to the first attack that had caught us off guard. Then out of urgency, I hastened to get in.

The door had even more bodies blocking the entrance. We collapsed on top of them as we struggled to straddle over the top. It was completely silent. Not empty though.

Around the right-hand corner were a good hundred men cowering in the shadows. They shared that same petrified stare that got even more afraid as I closed in. Not a single one of them had anything but leather and woolen clothing.

“What happened to the witch?” I barked.

It then became apparent that they were all looking past me.

Finally, one of them spoke.

“Is he a prisoner?”

I muttered under my breath.

“He's one of ours. Where's the witch, I said?”

He slowly turned away. I followed his gaze to the table. To the bird ontop, watching us all.

That blasted scent of blood and pats drove me half mad! We were sheltered inside Ibaad's dining room, a good four-hundred men shivering in unison, praying a saviour would prevent an untimely death.

Most of the dying had stopped at least here. There were too many bodies blocking the front door to close it, so apart from the occasional whimper, the only sounds were of arrows thudding against the wood walls and the gradual patter of rainfall through the hole in the wall.

Not only did I realise how useless I was in these situations, I became able to notice how little I knew about handling them.

Firstly, I had underestimated my own strength. If Dima hadn't told me to, I would never have ushered in the survivors or even dared to pull in the ones hobbling around in the dark.

I'd also underestimated Dima. As powerful as she was, there were limits to her abilities.

She couldn't fight another witch, so when it came to fighting Ibaad, she'd been as helpless as me. So forming an army had been part of her selfishness, she needed Balt as much as he had needed her. *Well he had needed her more in the end.*

The worst thing I hadn't realised was how long it took for her to be powerful. Perhaps she had needed her staff, perhaps I should have just left it here. But for whatever the reason was, she had gone into the loft, overseeing the battlefield, for the best part of an hour. Clouds were forming but not the ones that hold lightning.

“Captain?”

A very young man approached me. I hadn't noticed him before but he stood out now like a sore thumb. His legs and hands were caked in mud, though it was clear that he was fair and slim underneath it all. He didn't seem to be injured, but his clothes were so soaked with rain and blood that they dripped red onto the painfully stained yellow carpet.

“I need to speak to the witch, Captain. I have a message for her.”

I stared at him hard. My newfound scepticism kept me alert.  
“She's busy.”

“Captain,” he hesitated, “If we stay here much longer this manor will soon be under attack.”

I didn't know what to think. looked him in the eye, examining him for any hint of dishonesty. I found none,

therefore led him upstairs.

Dima was agitated beyond belief. I found her clawing at the knots in her hair, hunched at the window and talking to herself.

“Dima. This man wants to deliver a message to you.”

She jumped at the sound of my voice. It took her a moment to recollect herself, then beckoned me forward.

“You may enter.” I grumbled.

I had to keep an eye on him. I hopped to the side of the door, where I could see every little movement that Dima couldn’t.

He marched in with a very official manner, making sure to close the door behind him before kneeling on the floor.

“Sire, I have travelled to the woods where the enemy were attacking us from. We’ve killed enough of them to provide armour and weaponry for all of your troops.” He paused, “Sire, my name is Mutz. I can understand your need to defend the manor, but please tell me why you don’t fight for yourself when you are stronger than all of us?”

Dima snapped at him, “Who are you to question me?”

Heat filled the room from both of them. Mutz on his knee, Dima above him, enraged. It was the same type of atmosphere that Balt would create.

Mutz didn’t look up.

“Very well sire.”

He was still very tense. I noticed his hand ball into his fist.

“Who am I to question the queen in a house of cowards?!”

He lunged forward springing a knife from within his concealed glove. I should have doubted him more.

The knife flew through the air, then exploded into a purple powder that blinded me. It burnt worse than lightning. There was a smash of glass and an explosion of wood, but when I opened my eyes both Mutz and Dima had disappeared.

I checked the door to make sure it was still shut tight. It was. Water splashed my back through the empty window. A breeze cut through, and I noticed the hole in the wall. Outside the thunder boomed and gusts of wind blew stronger than any I’d

ever felt. The two of them were fighting hard. And the wind seemed to rustle leaves around them in a circle.

Even the thunder had changed. When it broke out through the clouds, its normal rumble had grown into a lengthy, fevered cackle.

Mutz came charging at Dima with his dagger in his hand, slashing wildly. For a while Dima stood waiting before calling down a thunderbolt that would split into a dozen more that struck around her like a fiery barrier.

Mutz couldn't get in, so he had to dodge backwards, which is when Dima took her turn to attack.

The wind was at a steady pace now. A tornado was brewing. I watched as it slowly gathered dirt and trampled grass, becoming more and more visible, growing darker...even powerful.

Dima leapt towards Mutz and threw lightning at him that somehow branched upwards as it fell. It was hunting him. Mutz darted backwards again, escaping unharmed by the volley. It was only due to my keen eyesight that I was able to make out Mutz throwing his knife away in an effort to defend from the lightning.

The whole sky had been filled with dark clouds that gravitated towards the ones above the battlefield, caught in the tornado. As I stared up to the swirling colours I suddenly remembered the manor. At least fifty men were injured downstairs, unable to flee. What if it killed them all? What if I had only wasted my time?

My heart pounded at my nerves. I could feel the pressure consuming me, inside I could only think of one solution. This has gone on long enough. But if I took the stairs, would I make it in time? I flexed my wings, spread them as wide as they would go. They ached, but the pain was bearable. Why are you so scared?

Feeble is the word for it. I doubted myself, that I would survive the night, that my wings and my Dima would do anything but betray me.

“Stop trying to be a man.”

I folded my wings and turned behind me. My shadow

flickered in the dim of the night sky. Noone else was there. But the voice said what I needed to hear. It was ridiculous to be scared. A bird scared to fly? A creature struck by lightning...to fear getting struck again?

I'd lost Benjamin, I'd lost everything, because of my inaction. That one time I flew into the clouds, was the first decision of my life. And look how much better off I was for it. I'd be rotting in a cage if I weren't here.

The tornado was a beast now. I could now only see its tough black hide dancing. Oh and how its top glowed with static!

No more hesitating. No more doubting. No more fear. Chase the hope.

I bounded through the hole in the roof and found myself immediately whipped up by the suction. Even without my wings I'd be helplessly carried straight into the eye of the storm.

It crashed me through the wall and I was stunned by the immediate brightness from above. The lightning seemed to trickle downwards. It was only after that I realised they were actually falling with tremendous speed. There wasn't even a boom to be heard over the incessant howling of the tornado and its rampaging heartbeat.

Dima stood glistening at the bottom. Her hair shot leftwards as if it were alive a fiery claw reaching for her prey. Mutz however had trouble standing. He kept clawing to the ground and hoping to have some advantage against Dima, but whenever he got close enough she would try to strike him. To make matters worse for him, it became a hassle just to stay away from the edges. The further he got from the center, the stronger the wind pulled on him, bouncing him into the air at times. If he didn't die from the lightning, he would surely run out of air to breathe first.

The tornado picked up speed resulting in my emittance to the outside world. From there I spotted smoke dwindling in the moonlight. The clouds had begun to clear, making it much easier

to take in my surroundings. There, on the manor's back side were dark but not invisible soldiers sneaking from the tree line! We were under attack!

I pushed my wings back, looping back in the hurricane, and aimed as low as I could arc.

“Dima! Ambush!” I cried.

Dima noticed me fluttering like a wasp but she did not seem to hear anything. I imagine her confusion at the sight of me, for she then sprung from the ground, letting the wind carry her up and out of the tornado wall.

She must have seen what I saw. She billowed back in and kept flying up to the top. What happened next was simply magical. A cataclysm of lightning cascading over the manor into the garden. From afar it was a sight beyond belief, as the tornado died I flew far above Dima where I could watch it all slowly. The bolts hunted every man striking at every angle like a spirit of man and nature combined. It was the longest moment of my life. Dozens of men fell to the ground, only for hundreds more to emerge from the woods screaming their various battlecries. They would all fade to nothing in the shrieking of the storm.

I flew into the house, through the wall, where the soldiers I thought to be attacking turned out to be our own, dressed in dull red armour and crossbows at the ready. I called for attack and they all took to the wall screaming, firing wildly into the unknown. Dima was out there still unleashing one thunderbolt after another, thunder booming again like the roar of a sky lion, but I had no doubt in my mind that she would not fall to a mere crossbow bolt.

“Aye we're unarmed, but are we dead?”

“NO!”

“Aye we're numbered, but are we dead?”

“NO!”

“Trust the man who screams the most to die right before his screaming could help someone! Fire!”

When the thunder ceased, I held up my wing. We all paused,

waiting for the sight of any man. Clouds shifted from the moon once more. The battlefield was dead. Only Dima and Mutz were left panting. The maliciousness gone. The battle was over.

Every man cheered in disbelief that we had had our first victory as an army. I gave the order for them to collect any bolt heads and loot the dead for spoils. I would soon tend to the wounded. Thereafter, we would begin our fortifications. Then move on.

## 7 - The Only One

Back at the manor, the majority of the wounded were being treated. Almost all the survivors had missing arms, legs, or both. Dima and I walked through the front door to help patch up the hole in the wall. Rupert wasn't happy about it, he'd managed to round up some men to carry the food we'd stolen from Ibaad's store room out of the stable and into the house to be served as rations. Now there would be no hole, he had to go the long way round. Honestly, we could have just left it here in the first place, why did they decide to loot *everything*? Looking around, there were maybe five hundred of us, possibly more. Less than a dozen capable of fighting. All the uneaten food from the feast had been spoiled, kicked over into mud or drenched in the rain.

I shook my head, frowning at the disarray. "How much should we leave here, do you think?"

"Well, *surely* that depends on how far we're going, don't it?"

Daniel approached, swaggering, the drunken fool. "Eh and if more soldiers come to this house, *which they will*, they'll be picking us off like fleas." Daniel spat, swigging from his bottle.

It suddenly became crystal clear why the fourth pirate hadn't stuck around. Even if he had survived, he'd end up with a sour reputation with Daniel around. The man could speak well and see clear, but don't we know a dampened temperament can take a drunkard to, let's say, *regrettable* actions.

But...he was making sense.

"We can't move this many injured people with us though." I grumbled.

Dima started the second row of bricks. "There's only one thing for it then," she said. "We have to hand over Lord Ibaad to the police."

Daniel dropped his bottle. It smashed into millions, smashing the chatter with it. Without a second's hesitation, he styled through the hole in the wall, running off like a mad horse, trying not to trip over his legs. I began to laugh, but Dima chased after him. I suddenly felt alone in the joke, and took chase.

Back in the stable, the carriage Ibaad was locked in could be

seen through the wide doors. At its head was a man in an all grey suit. And through the window? A sobered, furious Ibaad.

“Get away from there!” shouted the drunk.

I learnt later that because the carriage was iron, Ibaad couldn't strike it without electrocuting himself.

Just at that moment the man in grey managed to pick the lock and Ibaad sprang out at us. I finally recognised him, Lord Ibaad's butler who got away in the kidnapping!

“Dima!” I called.

It was already drizzling. We need to save her so...so she can save us...

Ibaad wouldn't stop screaming. He had become furious at the army's idleness and made the clouds spit more lightning than I had ever seen.

“Stop her! She's a witch! She'll enchant you all and kill the survivors! She'll give you potions and lock you with her charms!”

The clouds cackled and rumbled, they spat lightning at Dima. But this time, Dima was prepared. A second lightning bolt sprayed down a fraction of a second later, but more direct, intercepting the first one. They clashed then combined, punching right into the manor's side creating another big hole. Through the dust I could hear Rupert screaming orders at everyone to get into the basement. Then came the boom. The two strikes were the loudest thing I've heard. My ears popped and my cheek flared red from the white hot heat.

It took the longest time for my eyes to adjust back to the night. They fixated on Rupert, running blind drunk at Ibaad.

“Dima! Rupert!” I screamed at her, flapping my arms wildly.

She looked at me, then followed my gaze to see Rupert, flinching into action. I held onto her leg desperately. CRASH. Lightning fell right behind Rupert. The double boom was excruciatingly painful, I felt my ears would bleed at any given second. The man had lowered his head, charging into a headbutt with mud flying behind him as if he were a horse. You've never seen anyone so ridiculous. Including Rupert. The man even started roaring.

“GRAAAAAAARGH!”

I saw a tiny, thin trickle of lightning start to crawl down from the sky. Had my brain slipped into slow motion again? Dima

intercepted it, but made a grave miscalculation. Ibaad hadn't made it thin to be less visible. It was much less powerful, so much so that when Dima's lightning knocked into it, it didn't do much more than feed into it.

Their bolt came closer and closer, until it was just a pure white light in my eyes. The last thing I saw was Ibaad, mouthing "die". The light lingered, my body seemed to forget how to breathe. My brain wasn't working any more. *Is this what death feels like?*

White faded into tar, and with the overpowering roar of the ebb I felt my body choke in awe. Twasn't death, twas the night sea clawing noisily at the land like a hound at a bone. The world sank as Dima, whom I was still gripping tightly at this point, fell to her knees with a sigh of utter frustration, or perhaps it was relief.

I didn't have to ask her to know she was also planning to return to battle immediately. Likely her hesitation was from not being able to save Mutz in time, so I threw in my two-pence.

"You're not shaken over that rum-filled thing, are you?" I chimed.

While she stayed paused to process, I turned my head around, gathering my bearings. My jaw dropped on its own accord, pulled by sheer disbelief. We were nowhere but the very same island that Dima and I had first met upon! Straight down the beach was the road made of water we took, give it a couple hours run we could make it to help the others where we could! Granted Ibaad must be gone, I was instead thinking of the poor souls trapped in the basement of that now beaten-up house.

Dima soon recollected herself and picked herself up off her knees. Without a word she headed up the bank to snap a branch off the nearby pine trees, snapping the brittle bits to form a makeshift walking stick. I remembered her staff, buried four miles or less from the shore on the other side of the sea. The thought of flying ahead to fetch it dared to cross my mind, but my dear soul clutched to her leg as if it were my own. Even today I can't tell you if it was the height of those monstrous waves or the anxiety of being alone, or worse a mixture of the two. I held my grip,

deciding to make a decision once we had crossed and not a moment sooner. I wouldn't tell her it was buried either. I was sure it would offend her to see an item of such importance be dirtied.

Oh what a perilous journey it was, the clouds, they would not part, and the heavens could not shine. A night that seemed unending with all sorts of beasts; eels, foxes, sharks, piranhas, made from the foaming tides racing perfectly perpendicular to our path. Dima could not, or would not run past them. She'd tucked her hair inside the collar of her shirt letting it rope down into a bulge. Wearing the dead man's chainmail earnt us punishment, dragging Dima down to a hunch with only her legs to keep us. A true ship she was, sailing against the seas and gales, gusting with all their might to topple us. Had it not been for that walking stick, I'd be telling my story to the fish instead of you.

On the last half kilometre the unimaginable occurred. Dima started sinking. It took around five times as long to pull her knees out of the sea, take the next step forward. I'm afraid I will be judged for this, but before the water had a chance to jump on me I fled to the air, immediately blown westward. It felt like a supernatural shove in the back. I caught Dima's eye a moment before I was too far to, and almost like magic, the winds all died down at once.

I glided to the shore and waited for her to walk, upright again, the last few metres and meet me.

“What was that!?” I squawked angrily. “Listen here and listen well, I'm giving you four reasons why I can't trust you and hold you to them for the rest of my life if I have to! First off, you say you control the weather. But then you go and whip up a storm, biggest one since Father Time was born, when the only two men about are you and me!

“Second, you've shown and proven Ibaad another witch and I bravo you for that. But he's always the one sending us away, and for that I shan't forgive you! How in blue blazes can we beat the most powerful witch in the world, with nothing but a witch acting apprentice to him! And the worst of all, when it's time to go back to help, you don't bliddy speed up! You're trying to slow us down, aren't you? You want us all to die in a bloodbath? Is that

it? Is that why you fought on our side? To slaughter the wolves before the sheep? I- I-"

and for whatever reason I had lost my temper I regained it, sinking into a deep sleep with the soaking wet woman was consumed by fleeting darkness before my eyes.

I dreamt of the future. I was back atop the tree where the staff was buried. It was the end of Autumn according to it's bareness, though where I looked down there was not a leaf to be found. All foraged for nests or cleaned for better footing. I climbed down to check, yes even the leaves covering the staff were gone someplace. The staff too. There was no reason to panic at this time though, for you see this was not my first *déjà-vu* so I simply assumed I'd already recovered it by now. Clambering down rather steadily I wondered why I would not use my wings here. Yes, there was a patch of dead grass where the staff had been hiding, I had remembered the spot exactly. The road stretched both ways, the northern entrance of town, one, and the beachfront we were first attacked on, the other. Retracing my steps seemed the wisest thing to do. I'll go to the beach first, then up the hill by Ibaad's manor. Truth be told, I'm a little superstitious, the thought of ghosts might've torn my head in two. Off I was, marching to the beachfront without a care in the world. Hearing the waves caress the shore teased me. This was nothing like that devilled island swarming with tsunamis that roared like dragons. I was calm, gleeful, miles away from whatever nightmare was plaguing me before. All I wanted was to hop down the dirt road, marvel at the pattern my footprints had made, and carry on. Up past the beaten path that leads to Baltimore's lodge, though it belongs to his crew now, then beyond the slope was the sea. I half expected to see myself there. All of the birch and pine had all been chopped down for the winter, giving a clear sight all the way round with only the houses obstructing. If I had my wits about me I'd detect how bizarrely quiet it was, especially in contrast to last time. What a giddy fool, hopping non-stop around the corner and over the big hill. Then it hit me. The memory of Ibaad and Daniel charging at him flashed, in front of my eyes the house had been razed, foundations and all. In its place

was a garden of graves. Fenced off from the path so as to preserve their sleep. It clicked. Those men under the floor boards, the army we had terrorised, everyone's blood was on our hands. My hands. I did this. I sent for Ibaad to be captured and killed them all, first Balt, then one, two, no, nearly nine-hundred of them. My stomach turned and I keeled over for air. *They need to be buried, just like Dima said to, or they'll haunt me when the sun goes down for the rest of my miserable life.*

Salt burned my nostrils like they were snails. I cried in agony. Dima watched me squirm at her feet. Another wave caught me and I soon realised where I was. That whole dream happened in barely a moment of real time. Ah my head was spinning, I remember that quite well.

Dima crouched down, grabbing a fistful of sand. "Let's get this straight. I never said I control the weather, you did. Not everyone's the same and the sooner you learn that the better."

She got up and walked off slowly.

"Tell me the third and fourth thing without slowing me down now then."

I would've grown tempered, if at that same time some strangers appeared walking down the great hill, shielded from the sun.

A flag made of torn wallpaper fluttered on a stick. Rupert carried it through the wind, leading a town of survivors home with a wagon in tow. In the other hand he dragged Ibaad as if he were a sack of grain. Proof that today, victory was ours.

We wasted no time at the barn. Kegs were emptied and all rations that could be taken were loaded into carriages. This time, Ibaad was left jailed underground, and because there was no police left, the door was sealed shut with molten ore.

Anyone too injured would stay to drink their wounds free. Those missing both legs were promised medals, given a commemorative crossbow, the only things transported in the wagon. Anyone who could just about walk was to carry a shovel with our group, back to the house, and dig graves. They would go

back to their normal lives after, defending the town alone if need be. Us healthy ones were to carry on past the house, directly east to the county border.

We ended up staying a little longer than we intended. Balt's crew had fallen to just one man, and Rupert would not leave before the moon was at its fullest, so we all helped with the burying, graves inches apart, laying the corpse as straight as corpses could.

Balt's corpse was the largest. We all gave Rupert a hand wheeling Balt back to the lodge and on the way he told us how the battle went.

Rupert had watched Dima disappear from the safety of the ground floor windows, sending him into a frenzy. It looked as if she had struck herself and gone away. Fortunately for us, Ibaad no longer had time to deal with him once he had dealt with us. His wild headbutt knocked Ibaad right off his feet, sending him toppling. Mutz then picked him up with both hands, roaring in the rain. Ibaad had tried to strike near his own body, so as to avoid electrocuting his own blood, which doesn't quite make sense to me. If Dima could teleport with someone else, why wouldn't Ibaad?

Anyway, Ibaad conceded as the pair smashed empty bottles on his head until he fell unconscious. Rupert even managed to sight the butler in the flash of lightning that followed, and before his pupils readjusted to the darkness, fired two enemy crossbows directly at him.

"He's either with the angels, or in the belly of a wolf, ain't that right, Angel?"

It's hard to say how Dima took to being called "Angel". It wasn't right but it was a height better than "Witch".

We had six nights until the full moon. That night everyone but I slept easy. We were lodging in the haystack in the barn, yet I crept out to find the staff in the fear I was not the one who found it in my dream. Luckily it still lay there untouched. As I carried it in my mouth, I couldn't help but wonder what Benjamin would

say to me as a ghost. Undoubtedly he'd be threatened by the change in my physique, bulkier than he'd ever known me to be. Perhaps he'd regret not owning me at this time.

Something stopped me from taking the coastal path, the one I had followed in my dream. I headed towards the hill instead, I probably just wanted to keep my distance from the pirates' cool, keen senses, or it could've been Dima's magnetism drawing me towards her.

She was climbing the hill alone, she's the only one I thought would have a walking stick, foolishly I might add, considering how many injured we had. But as I gave chase I could at last see it was her, we had had the same idea to creep out in the night. Although she would not smile, she expressed much gratitude for returning the staff, tossing the newer one over her shoulder. This one was far easier to walk with, it could be used at a natural height for her arm and was chiseled through years of weathering, the wood had never swelled and it carried dents to fit her fingers exactly. He must have seen many more men die than I had, every secret Dima had sealed.

We talked all through the night, her back to the tree I was once chained onto, and I told her all my adventures from the time we first met Ibaad. This continued every night. I would run out of stories and she would tell me of her shadow's world. The one that interested me most was a "game" called "Jib" that sounded no fun at all. Two kingdoms of equal size decide to declare war.

*Quite foolish.* And the entire kingdom surrenders once the king is captured, for he is forced to do the other kingdom's bidding by threat of death. The kings decide the kingdom will only suffer more without him, for he is a symbol of order. When the war is over, the defeated king regains his troops and attacks again, with no advantage but the element of surprise. Dima explained that it's a battle of smarts, if a king lets all his forces die, then he is as good as dead, unless the other king is in the same situation. I understand the concept, strength in numbers, but if you ask me the attacking king is a disadvantaged child, not much of a king at all.

Balt's funeral was something special. His tall third mate had

turned up, name still unknown to me, as well as every living member of town. They all had him to thank for their lives. Not just for sharing his wine supply, for giving them food. It's not easy to explain, but food has become a symbol of hope today, that we may live another month, that we won't have to watch our little brothers starve or the elder brothers grow insane. A day of silence was announced without words.

We stood along the pier, me with the best view from atop that tall boy's shoulders. Rupert single-handedly strapped the oxen-like warrior to the raft that had not been sailed for weeks. I believe they had argued over whether to bury him at land or sea, compromising with a mound of dirt dropped onto Balt. We all got given a turn to take a fistful of dirt, with the spare hand to shelter it from the wind as it fell.

Rupert went last. He held a special mound that had every blade of grass but one plucked from its earth, placed it on top, patting the air out gently. I hopped onto Dima's arm for this part, watching the raft be pushed out into the current, lit by the unnaturally large moon in such a way that all we could see was the grass's silhouette above what appeared to be a mountain sticking out of the ocean. The head of a crossbow bolt was used to stab some wool, then lit and catapulted into the edge of the raft, drowning the memory in a blaze of glory.

I remember the smoke thinning into a triangle. I could have sworn I could see Balt's face in it. Like his spirit was finally free from anger, hurt and doom. I hoped it would show me his smile. Dima says she felt his energy swarm us.

That night, Rupert joined us on the hill. He informed us that Daniel was either dead or had abandoned us. Together we watched the moon rise and fall, knowing the next day would seem like an entirely different world's.

I stretched and waved my wings in the breeze. *Hmm, a westward wind. Opposite to where we're headed, I don't suppose Dima has anything to do with this...* I hadn't heeded her words from before. Could anyone believe her? After seeing her call

down bolts of lightning to change the direction of another bolt, then to listen to her inexplicably deny any control of the weather, it would drive anyone mad! And I'm very sad to be the one to let you know, *that* is exactly what it did.

We met up at sunrise, the day had dawned, troops been determined and rations packed in as few carriages as could be handled. It was told the King would never leave his castle, or should I say, Benjamin's resting place. Thus the closest place to settle would be the city, through miles of valleys and up their hills to the highest point, where his troops could keep watch for an army days away. A sickness spread through my stomach, Dima calls it "butterflies".

"What are you thinking, Crow?"

Dima gently nudged me, noticing my troubled expression.

"I was just thinking about last night, the funeral? I should do something similar for Benjamin. Just to thank him I suppose."

"You must feel entitled to do much more for him than you did for Balt. Do you want to visit your home while we're in the city?"

"To my— I mean Benjamin's flat?"

"If you don't think it's haunted."

It was certainly worth thinking about.

At the end of the valley was nothing but sea, we began our ascent of the hill, to the parish border. From here I would have to be our acting watch, take to the sky where I would be able to scan our surroundings to give us a fair advantage on any attackers.

Up there, I spotted the wall. It stretched across the hillside from coast to coast, two guards at the entry point ahead of us. They hadn't seen us yet and I cawed to the others.

Weapons were drawn as we approached. Someone rang a bell to alarm the others. We were met by a trembling captain that could not take his eye off Dima for a second. She held out her arm and I perched ontop of it. He stammered.

"We are headed to the city for an audience with his Royal Highness." I announced.

He was just as frightened of me as he was of her. I watched his eyes dart between us. Not a single word was uttered. All he did

was gape and stand aside. We marched on to our final destination.

The city is my home. Everything seems familiar. Stinking sewers, sprays of ammonia on the walls. Noone knew any of us and they all had the decency to leave us be. Marching on smooth cobblestones instead of mud or sand. Everything made a great clammer when it moved. I felt safe. Alert.

We spotted an open public house on the corner of a crossroads. Incidentally, it was named "The Hag's Head".

Inside we rested, polished our armour and drank our fill. Dima and I headed out to explore on our own. To see how much home had changed.

## 8 - Ben's Heart

Anyone could tell which house was mine just from looking down the street. It was the only one with no window in the frame.

Dima didn't say a word to me. I must have had a rather frightful look, imagining the footsteps, the determination creeping within Captain Roland's helmet.

Everything was as they left it. Door ajar, hanging from it's last hinge. Pipe on the floor with a new crack on it spewing dead ashes from its sides. Only thing tidy was the lack of papers. My old cage lay dented on it's side. I heard Benjamin's last words, "Be free," just from looking at it.

"Sorry," I whispered, "I'll be free soon, I swear."

Dima didn't hesitate to enter. She strided in, taking in the sights as an aristocrat would at an auction.

"Something stinks," she alerted.

I hadn't noticed anything, but once she mentioned it I couldn't think of anything else.

"Ah, bird droppings," she giggled, "You couldn't keep it in the cage? Ugh why is there so much?"

I was more alert than ever now.

"It's piled up." I whispered.

Dima looked back with a puzzled expression. I had to let her into my thoughts.

"These aren't my droppings. I haven't eaten in a month."

They were far too solid, you'd expect the water to evaporate from it in so long.

Dima crept to the windowside and I to the doorway. We weren't so much being cautious of an intruder as were of a spy. Certainly not if he was still in the flat.

My initial desire to leave was overtaken by one to protect not just Dima and myself, but whatever was left of Benjamin too.

Dima knocked a book off the nearest shelf. An immediate smashing sound came from inside the ink cupboard. That's when I noticed the floor was bloodstained beneath Dima's feet. Captain Roland's intrusion had broken an ink pot at the entrance. But all

the glass had been cleaned up, the shards from the window were all pushed cleanly to one side.

Dima pointed at the ink stain. A single footprint had been pressed into it. It belonged to a bird.

We flung open the cupboard door. Out flew a very plump blackbird wailing as a natural defence. It spotted Dima blocking the doorway and landed on the dining table.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he begged, “Take everything you want! It’s not mine!

“Why are you here?” I demanded.

“Why? I can’t! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! If I tell, Master Stay will surely sever my tongue and my throat and—”

“BITE IT!” I screamed.

The blackbird hushed, trembling pitifully.

Dima managed to get her words out before mine.

“What is he saying?”

“Your Master Benjamin is dead.” I said, halting Dima with an outstretched wing.

He stopped trembling and looked at us with wide eyes. Clearly he refused to believe it.

“If you don’t tell us who you are, we’ll send you on the first horse to see him.”

His heart pounded so fast I became surprised he didn’t die on the spot. Eventually he decided to calm himself down and clear his throat.

“Well I don’t know what to think now! Why if Ben’s dead then there’s no message to give him! If I’m stuck here waiting for a dead man then I’m as good as him! Finished! Done!”

I screamed at him and he stopped talking, mouth flapping in the motions but his mind reined in with fear.

Dima interjected, “Does he know anything about Ibaad or the laws?”

“Do I?” he squealed, “Why it’s all anyone will talk about! My friend’s friend has another friend that heard someone say man’s on his way to change the law! Foolishness, is what I said! You’d think they hadn’t heard Rule Six! No law shall be changed! And you know what he said? They’re rebels, Sebastian! If they don’t

follow one law who's to say they follow any of them! Madness, honestly!"

"Tell him to shut up."

"I did, he won't listen." I barked.

The blackbird hushed again, holding his wingtip in front of his beak. He'd forgotten what I'd told him already.

"Are you here to deliver a message to Ben?"

"Not anymore!" he squawked, "But if he's not dead, then I am!"

"We'll give you proof he's dead. We're going to bury him."

His eyes widened and he hopped closer.

"You'd help? That's rather kind of you sirs! Just tell me where and when and I'll be there, you can count on it! I can even give you this whistle round me neck, you see it? Special whistle that only I can hear, and I'll hear it a mile away, I will! If you haven't any idea where or when that is!"

"He wants you to take the necklace." I said to Dima, "He says if you use it to call him, he'll come running. He said that Rule Six says we can't change any laws and that he worked for Benjamin."

"You didn't know anything about him?" she asked.

"No." I admitted.

Dima stepped forward, carefully dangling the necklace by the string.

"Find out for us if the laws can be changed. Whoever is acting lawkeeper should be able to help us change it."

He agreed without thinking, flapping speedily out of the window, instantly swallowed into the dark of night. Too much was going on inside my head. I looked around the room, wondering what other secrets Benjamin had hidden from me.

Both Dima and I found it to be a very curious story. We wondered if the scout would ever return, and if he did what news he would bring with him.

"What will you do once the law is revoked?" Dima asked.

"I haven't given it any thought," I admitted, "I don't think there's anything else I want to do."

I popped a sloe berry into my mouth.

"And what about you?"

“I’ve only just thought about it. Before today, I was just empty, trying to feed my curiosity.”

Dima paused. Her appetite had died tonight. She simply stared to the bottom of her stein.

“I was wondering...what if the law can’t be revoked?”

“Eh?”

“That bird was very sure that it couldn’t. What would we do?”

Part of me wanted to return the question. Why are you only taking interest in the law now? Reluctantly, I obliged to say.

“Well then we would have to take justice into our own hands. The King must have known about the rule, yet did nothing to help his people.”

“You want me to kill him...”

The room grew uneasy.

“Is that a problem? I thought you’re used to killing kings.”

“In Jib, not in real life!” Dima protested, “And will the killing end then? Once there are no more laws?”

I had also lost my appetite by this point.

“Why did you decide to help me? You could’ve just left me to die on the island, wouldn’t your conscience be cleaner then?”

Dima puffed her cheeks.

“I had a vision, a *deja-vu*, that you would enter my life. And when your *deja-vu* comes true, that means you’re in the right place at the right time.”

“I just want to know when I can leave!”

“Leave now!” I yelled, “If you want to, just leave! Noone can stop Dima, queen of lightning itself! I couldn’t stop you if I wanted to! It’s not *your* problem because *you’re* not the one that’s lost everything!”

Tears welled in my eyes.

“Look at everything that everyone’s done for you! Balt’s dead! But you don’t feel the pain that we do! You’re no man, you’ve never lost anything in your whole stinking lifetime!”

I regretted every word. They all rolled off my tongue in perfect order. It...I assumed it was the right thing to say, what she needed to hear.

Dima didn't say anything. She stood up and left, not before slamming the scout's whistle on the table.

I chased after her. I had to. Thunder bellowed from all sides, aiding me in urgency. She was stood outside the public house in a confrontation with some poor soul that had gotten in her way.

I called out to her, "Dima, wait!"

But she didn't listen. Wind rushed around her shading her iris into black coal.

I grabbed onto her staff and she tried to shake me off furiously.

I remember a crowd forming, then there was a flash. Our yelling became drowned out by thunder's deafening grumble.

Just a flash. Then we were finished. I know it's not manly to, but the shock was so bad it made me burst into tears. This pain is like none I've ever or shall ever face, the pain of losing everything you've made, in nothing more than an instant. We were days away from the city. How could Dima accept this punishment every time? Wait...Dima.

"Dima?"

I stood up and inspected my body, seemingly in incredible condition even after plummeting from the clouds. Although I have now had plenty of practice.

I doubt Dima would leave me on my own, but you should know me by now, I'm very proud of my eyesight so I began to look for any clues she may have left me. Looking at the ground there were no tracks of any kind, not even the odd rattle of a disturbed scorpion. I was alone with the waves and their senseless chanting.

But I refused to despair. *Because we are so similar, that means we are most likely in the same situations, probably thinking the same things right this very second.*

Wandering into the forest at night, the most unfavourable of conditions, was nothing short of terrifying. There's so much anxiety from nowhere and nothing. *How can a nothing be so scary?* Though this may be the first time I didn't feel paralysed by fear, the fear was burning so bright in my mind it was visible, the image of a tiger or ginormous snake leaping out at me.

My spirits swooned upon finding footsteps in the rain. Deep and heavy in the shape of a boot. Dima must have come through here! As I followed the tracks though, I grew increasingly confused. They seemed to be going in ten different directions. She wasn't drunk...what had happened?

A moan erupted from somewhere, and I followed it. Something caught my bare foot. A fiery red hair the length of six or seven feet.

I started hugging the trees, jumping from branch to branch. Dima was in danger. I was the only one on the island, the only one that could save her. Grunting sounds came from behind the other side of the tree. I looked around and saw the glow of a fire.

I fluttered my wings and charged in. The biggest mistake of my life. Dima was not under attack, and the only beast I saw had two backs, including hers.

Looking back, it taught me something, the face of a maniac. Take a perfectly happy person, show them the trauma of the real world, then they spend every waking minute pretending not to remember it. I now know that Benjamin was facing his trauma every day by screaming at them. Well...maybe that was to make up for something really, really bad.

“Dima.”

Orange eyes beamed back like tempting chillies. I'm used to her not talking, but to see her like that, silent, smiling so stiffly...it looked sad enough to choke my words.

“We have to go, Dima.”

She laughed a ghostly sort of giggle, refitting her armour and covering her companion with a pile of leather clothes.

“Go? But, we're *already* here!” She stood up over the

campfire, "How can we go somewhere we were going to be?"

"Dima, if we don't go back we can't revoke the rule."

Things just got worse from there on. I wish my ears were better so I could hear the tension twinge before it snapped.

Her head spun to the side a little, making it crooked. "Let's hear that again? I, ME, someone you met less than a week ago, is responsible for fixing the stupid people in your world?"

The words hit me like a punch below the ribs. I blame it on the rum, but when she saw my reaction she cackled evilly. That witchly cackle bounced around the sand like damned spiders.

"Aye, aye, aye. And the funny thing is, the way *you* treat me.

"Not like the pets that are loyal, not like the deserted that show faith. YOU TREAT ME LIKE I DON'T HAVE A CHOICE!"

She was screaming her lungs out now. Her voice carried like hot fire. It began to rain. My legs trembled.

"Dima. Let's calm down. Don't kill me."

"HA HA HA! Don't be silly!" In a single move Dima grabbed a crafted dagger and trusted it so close to my waist that I thought the rain on me was blood spilling from my front.

"I'm the most powerful, the one that rules don't apply to."

The fire in her eyes was real. I had to say something before she was lost to the madness, maybe forever. What would Balt—I mean Ben—wait. No man knew Dima like I.

Keep thinking, Crow. Tears were already welling up in her eyes, but they were boiling hot, ready to evaporate and scream the thoughts that had made them ever so quietly, as tears do. I had hit a wall. I had to turn away.

"I'm sorry."

Pathetic. In that moment I could see myself as she saw me. A pathetic, helpless creature begging for power, for mercy. If the tables were turned, if I were in her shoes, then shouldn't I be treated like the King of E? If only I had thought more...all this time I believed Dima was our saviour. All this time...I thought us men were powerless.

I left that very night. To tell the others of Dima's decision, to finish the war without her.

## 9 - Deny

And so, there we sat between the shadows of a bar. A man never thinks about how dark it is outside until he has lost all hope, his mind sees only darkness. We sat amidst a gloom contagious enough to keep the crowd away from us three; myself, Rupert and Mutz.

Mutz's eyes filled with tears. He banged his fist hard on the table.

“We can't kill the king without her.”

Rupert sipped at his mead.

“Just alter the original plan?”

He looked around at our blank faces, then pointed downwards to draw an imaginary map for us.

“Instead of charging through, we can slip in disguised. Even if we can't fight off the hundreds of guards, we still have a tiny chance to kill him.”

I sighed, slumping my beak on the table.

“We can't do anything unlikely, or our entire army will die in vain.”

Silence fell as we wallowed in despair. There was just no way to fight through the guards and kill the king, not with our small, inexperienced army from the middle of nowhere.

Like an arrow, the stupid blackbird came flying indoors and landed at our table.

“SIR YES SIR! REPORTING FOR DUTY LOUD AND CLEAR!” he yelled.

“I didn't call for you.” I growled.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Rupert playing with the whistle I had failed to protect. I snarled at him, damning myself.

“I did *everything* you said! There I was! Flying over the oceans, dancing in the tornados, shivering in the mountains when thanks be to the giant sea monster, I found myself graced by the beauty of our fabled Stones of Law that we both share so much interest in!”

“Well shiver me timbers and blow me down, the elder was still there, and I told him all you said, word for word, and I got all the answers *lickety-split!* Course I knew I was right about Rule Six,

but I begged and prayed and I did anything a good person would do, alas I got absolutely zilch, nada, nothing from the elder! Why he would rather you all died than change his precious laws! And *that* is that!" he bowed.

I've never heard such terrible news before. He was crushing what little hope we had left for no reason.

Then it hit me! Bingo! I sat up straight like lightning had crawled down my leg.

"I've got it!"

They all looked at me bemused. "What if we can kill him without killing anyone else?"

"Bird brained twit!" Rupert spat at me. "You've already forgotten we can't get in the castle without Dima and the King hasn't left the grounds since he was bloody born!"

"Yes but noone in there does anything unless they're ordered to." I smiled cunningly, toning my voice down to an excited whisper. "If we can distract enough guards at once, that gives us an opening to go straight to the throne room! And since I've been once before, we only need a second to slip through, so long as we're faster than the guards they can't stop us!"

Rupert sat back and folded his arms, toying with the idea. Only Sebastian the stupid blackbird shared my enthusiasm.

"We might even be able to persuade the guards to let us break the third rule!" he grinned, "letting us kill him and end it all!"

Rupert didn't say anything. He just tipped what was left in his mug down his throat and belched under his breath.

We gave the announcement just before dawn, that the last first step was to be taken, that victory was in our hands. Suddenly everyone was pushing and shoving, scrambling to find their armour, sharpening all of their weaponry. Our army lined up side by side with Daniel at the front, heading straight for the castle walls. As they marched, they would pound their spear with their left footstep. Up the hill they went, pounding all the way. An alarm bell rang. From my watching point in a tree I could spot the castle guards taking aim with those crossbows. Out came the King's army, a square formation with their spears and shields equipped. But before they could even reach the gates, our army

had halted.

“We demand an audience with his Highness, Zaz the King of E!” Daniel bellowed.

The troops began to pound their spears on the ground again, as if they were still marching. People from the city started peering out their windows to get a better look at the ruckus we were causing, why to me, it sounded like one big giant angry heart beat. They kept pounding, lips sealed, til almost half the day had passed. We hadn't trespassed or threatened the King, we'd given him no reason to attack us seeing as there's no law against making noise. Then the sun fell, and our army marched away. There was no drinking that night, no secrecy, just peace. Then before dawn the next day, again came the marching. Daniel demanded to see the King, then the troops began pounding on the ground, making the heartbeat once more. Only this time no troops were sent out. No one took aim at our men. They just ignored us and went about their day as normal. I could sense Daniel's anger at me. This was the worst case scenario. We couldn't break in if no guards would hear our call. Then I noticed something unexpected. Our army was stamping. They didn't know the plan, but the injustice of being ignored had riled them up. I could see fields of horses and cows having their fences broken as all the animals tried to escape what seemed to be an earthquake. Our message was clear. We demand an audience with the King, are your soldiers so worthless to you that you will ignore their biggest message to you?

The sun set and the army marched away both angry and tired. Another silent night. Then it was day three. I was expecting someone to give up by this point, but everyone from before turned up like clockwork, just before dawn. Once again they approached the castle with the sound of an army's heartbeat and Daniel commanded the King. One of the watches stayed whilst the other went to notify the King. I found myself clenching the branches too tight, accidentally scraping some of the bark off.  
*Please send the guards, please, ple-*

Someone jumped out of nowhere onto my tree trunk, stabbing it for a solid grip.

“What are you doing?”

I froze. I'd know that voice anywhere. When I slowly turned around, I could look her in the eye. Did my eyes deceive me?

“Dima? What are you doing here?”

She took a deep breath and told me.

“I want to be here. The island doesn't have anything for me anymore. I got tired of being cold, being all alone and starving to death.”

The light faded from her eyes.

“I don't know whether I'm too curious or I just don't know anything. The longer I wait, the looser my limbs get. Sometimes, I don't know who I am.

“With you I'm more than just a feeling, an overwhelmed mind. You've made me realise that I'm different, that I'm not alone, that I'm always surrounded, living on an island.

Dima slowly opened her eyes. “It might not mean anything to you, but it gives me strength to know that at least some part of me refuses to give up.”

At the castle gates, the stamping had gotten louder, the sky grown overcast and the townsmen had begun to join in, so enraged by our cacophony that they had dragged whatever they had, axes, lumber, buckets, mops and rakes, up the hill so they could join in with the stamping. Our rage was infectious. Dozens then hundreds, a thousand more joined in the stamping, screaming obscenities along with all the insults you can imagine. Those same four hundred castle guards slowly emerged from the gates, armed with spear and shield, waiting for the command to attack. I don't know if they gave any orders since I was deafened by the pounding and that chant that erupted,

“We Want Answers!”

Not a moment later had the signal been given for all the guards to come at us. Thousands from all over the country had gathered at the main gate for the King's defence. *It's fine, we don't need to fight them.*

*But something was troubling me. All of these men carried slings with their spears. It was too late for us to retreat, we might*

*never have so many guards outside the castle again.*

Maybe I was lost in my thoughts too long, but my only thought had become "No Retreat". I found myself staring at the men not in armour, innocent townsmen caught in the heat of war. Dima looked at me.

"I need to stop them stamping." I urged her.

*Would they even listen to me before sunset?* I spread my wings and tried to find a breeze. Too late. All the castle guards were slinging at us. I was stunned. *They can't kill us. We haven't broken a law...they can't kill us!* I filled my lungs and screamed in the hopes Rupert would see what was happening and raise everyone's shields. He just turned towards me, baffled. This wasn't one of the signals we'd discussed. The shot of dung caught him hard in his top jaw, flooring him. Only about half our army had time to react and defend, but the townsmen had nothing to defend with. Some cowered on the ground curled in a ball while others ran down the hill like a man on fire. Dima's hand gripped tightly around mine. The battle had finally begun.

I hadn't noticed the rain from under the tree tops. All the townsmen had boiled over, screaming and charging straight for the walls. There was no sign of Rupert, so our army followed the charge in, assuming they had misheard the order. *Now, they will all be killed.*

I turned to tell Dima to help them but before I could I was struck by lightning. Everything was so clear, like my mind was watching in slow motion since I saw Rupert fall. The next thing I knew, Dima was crouching over me on a marble floor. Shattered glass tingled everywhere. I heard the boom of thunder. Dina had taken us into the throne room.

Whatever obstacle had intruded her mind on the island was long gone now. I no longer saw that soft, warm weakness in her, only that mesmerising dream of Ben filling the room with smoke remains, wrapping her up in the smog, clouding the damned doubts, bewitching her, one might add. She will never know the secrets of her power. She will become the greatest, because of the path my master took. Storm winds began to circle the sky from the impact. Cracks appeared on the tiled floor as if by magic.

Dima collected herself, shaking the glass fragments from her wooly hair. “Behold, the hurricane, the storm that killed the king.”

The throne room was mostly empty. The king stared down at us from his throne. Captain Roland had his sword drawn at the door with two of his guards at each side, mirroring him. King Zaz’s arm was thrust out, halting them. He knew exactly who he was looking at and was wary of losing any more of his forces.

We all knew Dima could kill Zaz from here. But she hadn’t. I kept my eyes on the three doors, doing my best to avert any surprises.

None of this was planned. I couldn’t raise my voice before Dima’s, or else they’d take it as a sign of weakness.

“Speak!” Zaz called out.

That just made me mad. Dima sensed the anger and instinctively summoned lightning to her palm. It crashed, sending more marble flying and making them all flinch.

“Stop talking you sick dog.” I hissed. “Scribe down your final commands, it won’t be heard.”

This was my moment of glory. Dima was waiting for my orders.

But Zaz refused to be undermined. Not here, in his own castle.

“You’re Master Benjamin’s pet!” he chuckled, “A writer prophesied to me you’d wrought a home of ruin. To think it would be my own! You’d storm through great and unstoppable dangers to judge *my* life and tear away at *my* life.”

The air started to glitter. Snow was falling through the broken rooftop. I could make out the swirling clouds through a mist that was starting to form.

“Why would you allow Rule Two-fifty?” I pleaded.

“Who am I to break a law? To defy all the kings that came before me?”

Zaz had begun to descend the stairs. It was completely reckless. What little life we had allowed him had made him bold and brazen. A jangle started to hammer around us. Hailstones bouncing on Dima's armour. I turned to her, realising she was not herself.

Had he weakened her?

“Dima, kill him.”

She stood motionless as a statue. The king continued his descent.

“Dima, he killed Benjamin Stay!” I cried, “Thousands have died because of him, because of Rule Two-fifty! He deserves it!”

He had entered into the storm, a golden sword drawn from its hilt. More marble tiles cracked from beneath his soles. Dima held out her hand in earnest, furiously shaking her fist.

The king was pale, expecting to die.

“Why?” she whispered, “Why do you accept your demise so easily? What king would allow his kingdom to fall?”

“It was meant to be. As King I am no longer fit for the image of never-ending strength or health. My rule has brought nothing but illness. And so it's either my way, or yours.”

“Pathetic,” she spat.

“When you die, the insurgency shall fall. Noone will challenge our laws again.”

He stopped his advance. He was close enough to behead her with a single swing of the sword. I was hidden between her feet, sheltered from the hail, frightened as a mouse.

“Everyone stop talking!” she screamed.

Everything I knew about madness was wrong. It wasn't fury, or rage. It was brokenness. Despite everything she had been able to do Dima found herself frozen, unable to move a muscle.

“Dima.”

She stared ahead, betrayed. Zaz swung at her head. I screamed and somehow she blocked it with a lightning bolt, sending his sword smashing into the ground, without breaking, melting or denting. But still she would not kill him.

“Are you the one that ordered me to die?”

The ceiling collapsed even more under the force of the hail.  
Our battle was a showdown of eyes, noone moving, noone  
nothing.

“You’re supposed to *kill* me!” he screamed.

“Kill him!”

“I know!!!” Dima cried, letting the first tear run instead of well.

To this day I shan’t understand her pain. She struggled for a moment, then stepped in closer.

“You authorised rule two-fifty, didn’t you?”

The king muttered something rude, readjusting his crown to his head.

“And?”

King Zaz dropped his sword.

“Ask me why I ordered the death of Mister Benjamin Stay.

“He was able to do what noone else alive could. I requested him to write me a story, a tale of no loss, be it arm, man or dream. Mister Stay wrote a prophecy of the day that would come here. Dying to the hands of an old, blind witch.”

“Then why didn’t you stop us??”

“There’s no stopping the future.” I whispered.

Ben knew he would die, right from the second he met the king maybe. He accepted his own death as did the king. He knew we would defeat him here. He knew when to give up.

I pulled on Dima’s boots, and static jumped out of her, coursing through my blood. The fastest *deja-vu* I’ve ever had hit me. Of the electricity in Dima flowing through the ground, being locked away into her shadow.

Whatever was happening in Dima’s head was real to her. Her muscles were locked. Her strength had died.

“I cannot kill him.”

“You must...” his evil eyes glew incensed with rage, “Thissss country needsss a warrior, a general to show them to be the sssstrongesst.” He roared, clearly upset by his missing control now.

I had to think quickly. Dima was in Ibaad’s situation, unable to use her power indoors unless it was extremely powerful.

“A contract!” I yelled.

Neither of them turned to me.

I flew up to Dima's shoulder, bracing for the hailstorm.

"King Zaz, you deserve a fate worse than death. You will serve under Dima for the remainder of your lifetime!"

The king laughed, picking up his sword again.

"I would rather die." he cackled.

Dima breathed out heavily. A hot cloud drifted out her mouth.

Zaz took one final swing.

Dima was able to fork lightning this time. It struck both Zaz and herself, sending him flying across the room. Captain Roland started towards him. He backed off when Dima walked up to him.

She had caught the lightning in her fist. It both froze trapped in her hand and wriggled furiously, latching onto the hail as it fell only to send the stones flying.

Dima crouched next to Zaz, holding the lightning next to his head. It zapped him repeatedly. His eyelids flew open, though he could not move.

"Remember me. I am not a witch. I'm just not a feeble, pathetic king. I am Dima, friend of lightning and mankind."

She leaned in closer.

"This electricity will never leave your body. It will live with you for the rest of your life. If you break our contract, if you ever betray me, you will die instantly. But I know you won't. If you wanted to die so badly, you'd be dead. You want change, as does every other person in the kingdom. Your change shall be delivered."

When she was done, she would walk out with Zaz's crown. Fighting from both sides of the army would seize immediately. No one else was to die. And when she roared, our men roar with her. For the first time in our lives, victory was assured.

Outside the throne room, through the courtyard and down the first passage on the left. There he was, bathing in the fumes of rot decay and something much more horrid. Barely a skeleton, sat

with his back to the jail bars where he could get one last look at the sky. His pockets were still full; one embroidered handkerchief, a vial of viscous red liquid and two rounded iron cufflinks. The last item was a green shell whistle. Identical to my own. His clothes didn't fit him anymore, but I choose to keep them with his body, for the funeral. It's how he'd want to be remembered.

One thing had changed about the room. Next to the old bag of vomit were pages, the paper he'd had to write on for Zaz...the last thing he'd ever written. I took it upon myself to read it, cherishing each word within my memory before we would lay him to rest.

Old King Zaz, the king of E  
I've come to hear your summons.  
Be warned that he who summons me  
Hears Death before his talons.

Once we were but soft, young boys,  
Hungering for adventure.  
One day our stomachs had no joy  
So lightning fell to get ya!  
Legend or curse, noone could tell.  
They heard my stomach churn!  
“I shall not eat, I can not breathe,  
Because all red ink burns!”

They took it from a witch's cave  
Where witches go to die.  
If I don't write red every day  
I take the witch's mind!  
The more it's read, the more it stains,  
The more minds weep with ink  
And then you'll realise everyday  
You wrote your fingers pink!

This writer's curse spreads through you all,  
All men shall fear their dark side.  
When witch is gone they'll all return  
Your laws to holes and rat stys.

## Epilogue - Where the Women Went

I led our group to the Law Stones on a four day trek, up the mountains to the far East. We carried Benjamin's body on a sleigh pulled by four men on two ropes, one with a firm base fitting for rough grassy terrain as well as snow.

No answer from Zaz had proved particularly helpful nor overly clear, for as the sage said, a rule has never been and shall never be allowed to be revoked. Though there's no law against it, to break from tradition is practically sacrilege. Rather than have the country turn traitor and break the rules that governed it since time begun, Mutz suggested we "rebels" should make the rock illegible, so though everyone knew it, they could choose to ignore it. Roland demanded increasing security after the event, but deniably agreed to it. When we returned a week later the entire kingdom feasted unlike ever before.

A private party was held in the castle halls, and those not invited were celebrating in their homes. All of the mills had been grinding flour non-stop this week. Interestingly enough, any type of inedible food had just been stored, for noone had any clue as to what should be done with it. The only things we were short of were wine, fruit and vegetables. Many of the parishes had razed their own fields to the ground in an effort to enforce the law and fend off temptations. Wine however, was wasted on us anyway. Because we all had such a taste for it, tonight would be the last night most of us would be able to taste it for years.

I decided to arrive separately from the others. To be honest, I'd a sick feeling of loneliness. We had all dreamt of this day, where our futures unravelled and we each followed our own path. It's just that I couldn't see my path anymore.

Flying made my life seem simple. Soaring over the castle gates to arrive in the courtyard, I no longer faced the trials that other men do. Perhaps it's as Dima said, when you find someone similar to yourself, it's hard not to separate from them. I must have taken a stronger liking to the blackbird than I had thought.

Dima was the easiest to pick out. I called out to her and she held out her arm in acknowledgment, allowing me to land.

She was engaged in a polite conversation with none other than Captain Roland.

“Good evening, Captain.” I chirped.

He had only pure hatred for me. His face turned red, then he reluctantly bowed, excusing himself from my presence.

“I bet he wished he killed me now.” I chuckled.

The party was filled with soldiers from both sides. Ten of the longest tables I’ve ever seen were piled with food. They were at least double the size of the one Ibaad had had in his room.

Gorgeous assortments of roasted lamb, sliced sausage, cow’s milk, wine, mead and cider. My mouth watered from seeing so much variety, the sparkle of the braised pork only stirred my appetite for the ruby red grilled fish fillets decorating it.

“Look around,” Dima muttered, “They all have their beverage in hand, but noone from the King’s army has dared take any food.”

“I wonder if they think tonight is a trap, that they would be executed like Benjamin had.”

Dima laughed, marching me to the banquet table. Heads turned in disgust as she stuffed a whole leg of lamb into her mouth, practically swallowing it whole, licking the juices off the bone.

Who cares if she aroused suspicion? Dima had never been one to hesitate, it was an act of intimidation, a test to see who would side with her. All of our men followed one after the other, bringing their merriment, laughing loud enough for every man to hear. I noticed a few men from the other side joined, but could not catch a glimpse of Captain Roland.

A man came running up to us with a King’s soldier not far behind him. He was the only one not in a suit of armour and his plump belly made him stand out even more.

“Your Lightning! Captain Crow! A pleasure to see you to be sure!” he whinnied.

Beneath his beaming smile was a face I barely recognised.

“Are you the man from the stable?”

“Him I am, Captain! And I’ve never been gladder!”

He wrapped his arm around the soldier’s shoulder, giving him a good, hard shake.

“Him here, he’s one of the policemen that first saw Dima

coming out of the water on the beach! So sure he was that you'd kill him that he fled as far away as his legs could carry him and found himself here in the capital!"

Our stranger chuckled, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye.

"I've known him all my life! Thought I'd never see him again, didn't I Roger? And look where I've found him! Reunited at last, by none other than you, the woman he ran for days to get away from!"

He burst into laughter, wheezing and slapping his knee. He left unable to stop laughing, turning to the table behind to repeat the same story.

Dima hadn't seemed to notice him. But now she stopped slurping her pork belly and licked the juices from her cheek. Captain Roland had caught her eye. He had an urgent, beckoning look on his face. And so we followed.

Captain Roland led us into a private room. Inside was a round stone table surrounded by seven stone seats. Clearly the only empty seat belonged to Dima. Two seats to the left was Zaz, old king of nothing. Mutz was seated on our right, and the four remaining seats had men we didn't recognise by face. Seven more men were acting as bodyguards. I recognised the one behind Captain Roland to be Daniel, the pirate that had worked under Balt until the day that he died.

When we looked around the stone table, we took note of every feature, learning each other's habits as well as we could. In that dark guarded room with only one torch and the large cracks in the ceiling for light, it seemed we had nothing in common but our interest in the Kingdom of E's citizens. In particular, the other witches. Our sole intention was to never be halted by anyone like Ibaad again. We had Dima and Mutz to serve as role models, while Captain Roland was here to convince the others they would be protected, ergo the thought of a witch was no longer a threat. The soldiers were to be assured that we stood together, and that neither party was in control of the other. Zaz however, served only as a spokesman to bring our country peace by bearing its people's hatred.

The other four men were introduced as the remaining Lords. We would each have our own districts to resign to at the end of the meeting. Except Zaz who would be confined within these walls until his dying day. Upstairs was to be used only for visiting guests. Army men could stay at home for their orders from now on, or, should they require, be trained in the forts all over the country. Dima would replace Ibaad, Mutz was to guard the laws with as many men as he'd need.

Which brings us to the purpose of this meeting.

“What do we know about the witches?”

Dima interrupted, “Before we start, what has happened to the bodies of those that died?”

“They've been taken to the hillside to be buried,” Captain Roland answered.

Zaz held out his arm. Obediently, Captain Roland handed him a book with a purple face.

“Dima was the first one we know of to come out of hiding. And considering the circumstances,” he glanced at Dima, “they're not too fond of being called witches.”

“We can control the lightning,” Dima added, “but it only has varied effects on each other. A normal man should be killed by it instantly, which is not always the case.”

She looked to Mutz, who managed a half-smile in return.

“There are restrictions to the effects they have on the weather, and how often the weather can be changed.” I muttered.

Zaz slid the book to Dima.

“Past kings have given me documents of past witch sightings,” he said, “In the mountains is a witch's cave, where noone has ever dared to go before.”

If Zaz was to be of any use, he wanted us to know everything. I pitied his helplessness.

My future seemed dim. I agreed to watch over Dima's district while she investigated. And after that night, I saw nothing but peacefulness.

The peace died young though. Everything changed when Dima disappeared after a certain accident involving the young man Nehrs, whom you've briefly met back at the island.

Although I left them to it, I couldn't keep away. My gut told me to go with them, but I'd lost the heart for adventure. So it was all I could do to send a scout to keep an eye on them, sit, and wait for them to die. He told me everything when he returned. If I had more Benjamin in me I'd have gouged his eyes out.

My gut told me Nehrs was bad news, I never liked him and don't you know animals can tell a person's intentions the best? Noone hated Dima, they would only ever flounder between growing jealous or falling in love with her. Not that I believe in such things. You see, the old king, Zaz, was questioned about the whereabouts of any other women. He admitted he'd never seen any, but heard fables of them from other countries. One legend details a witch enchanting women in the beginning of time, driving them mad with power, swearing revenge on the witch's offspring. Another one tells about the women's offspring waging war after stealing the magic, though Zaz believed this one to be set in the future. We left him his prophecies and Dima took the only clue we had, "If you find the witch's cave you might find her, or at least know more of her."

Well, one day Dima was writing her law, number 372, all rebel forces are to be pardoned for any defiance during the duration of Zaz's tyranny, and then the next they were off heading further east, to the taller mountains! I don't know what was driving Nehrs today, but he seemed to have some respect for her than usual. Being a little taller he could tease her for being slower or for even so much as breathing louder. Dima must've sensed it, for very unlike her, she would stop to take frequent breaks, just to click a mental picture of the scenery. She would look up the mountain to where the sun had started to set, for the mountain is the only place in the country from which the sun can be seen. Not at it directly, the beauty was below emanating from purple crystals of all cute shapes and sizes, some larger than the tallest man! It's why this mountain was the most popular burial site. Not only that, being so far north made it feel like the sun would never set. Why it reminds me of how Crow talks about the

island he found Dima on! Hurricane Island's what they call it now.

They followed a valley trail as they tried to get higher. Nehrs had halted before rounding the corner. Dima hurried, so as to not leave the young lad waiting.

“Look,” he said. “This must definitely be it, forsake darkness....be blinded by truth... ah yes!”

A twitch buzzed through his body, disabling the too-tense shoulder from it's rigid post. He shivered when they're fingers merely touched the rock's faded wall markings. Dima hadn't caught on yet. She started reading the text aloud. Nehrs was furious. He smacked her hand away in the fashion of some disciplined monk.

“Keep it in your head!”

Dima stared back stunned. She sat with a very fed-up manner watching the man finish tapping every big and small seemingly ordinary bump. Call it paranoia, call it whatever you will. Me, I reckon they wrote their markings with blood or shit back in that day and that's as advanced as they'd get.

What was interesting was how moist the cave appeared on the inside. Either it was raining through the ceiling, or something was being used to cool the water vapour in the air. Could also be heat too for that matter. Some stalactites bit their way into the cave. Dima clambered in through a smooth hole in the wall. “Don't need the torch here.”

“Even so,” Nehrs grumbled, “The Sun's not gonna wait for us now, is it?”

“Nest!”

It was pretty much a bundle of flattish stones spread around. A couple of them had slightly greyer shades or more cracks than others. Nothing worth suspicion.

“See there's no markings here? King's men would've only left it alone for a good reason. And those dips there in the floor are from something way too heavy jumping about in here.”

“Aye and see that lump in your head? Means you chose the wrong time to get bitter over nothing.”

Nehrs feinted a punch at her laughing as she knocked it away

and started punching hard at his armour.

“Relax Dima, if it's not got any eggs or young ones here than there's only one monster in the world we need to take care of.”

“One too many for my liking.”

“Who says we have to kill it? For all you know it could be friendly, or the last of two in the world!”

I've never seen a pair of humans enjoy bickering so much that it carried on into the sunset. Wasn't much of a sunset to be fair, it just dipped under the clouds to give them a yellowish glow, wiping their shadows on the rocks above us.

“Woah!”

The floor had cracked open just enough over the years for a purple laser to be refracted from the first room. They climbed back in and looked down. It was coming from the light of another big crystal, illuminating the room below filled with more rocks.

“'Scuse me!”

Nehrs had sat down and slipped his ribs through a hound-sized gap in the floor. I laugh at how he didn't consider how he'd get back up, the fool. Dima followed suit, tapping at the stalactites first to see how sturdy the wall was. Satisfied, she fell down.

heard everything from above without being seen. The crystal dipped right through the floor, and inscribed with common tongue that Dima couldn't read.

“oh yib, ol gif”

“Those with power, summon sun. Those without, enter night.”

Those with power suggests witches but Dima protested, saying she couldn't strike it with lightning from here.

“And since the walls are intact I wouldn't like to.”

At first it puzzled them. Dima moved to tap it with her staff, I assume to test how genuine it was, then yelled out loud in agony. Her staff had sunk through the outside as if it were water! The wood burned hot to the touch, a moment later bursting into flames. Nehrs stepped back looking for a foothold. But Dima stood there in the water shaking. Almost exactly like all those men she'd killed, pumped with a deadly amount of electricity. Her heart pumped loud and she wouldn't release the staff. Her joints twisted and she fell to one knee, fingers twitching in an odd

contorted fashion. Outside the clouds grew dark. The laser faded. A mighty boom echoed for miles across the land. In Dima's place stood a one-metre-and-a-bit crystal. Between her and the other one, a half burnt staff joined them. My new master...gone.

The next day, the clouds would fade. The wind would begin to hush. Seeds would begin to sprout and mist would begin to fall. I had Zaz open his most treasured book, detailing the prophecy and its relation to the carvings seen in the cave. We agreed that it was mostly relevant to everything we had seen, but found ourselves in a heated debate over what it depicted about the future.

I had a sudden urge to revisit Hurricane Island. The wind was calmer than ever, I could hear myself think over the cascading waves for once.

It just seemed lifeless without her. Even the image of a storm seemed to clear from my mind. What was once a living nightmare now passed like a fading dream.

As I ventured into the jungle, a mighty wind ripped through the taller trees. I half expected to see Dima safe and sound, but she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I found something terrible.

It was in the witch's cave. Outside the wind was ravaging the canopies, shredding even the tallest of trees to lie flat on the ground. I'd like to say I took caution, but by this point I was convinced I'd find Dima inside. Wails echoed from the depths. I rushed in recklessly, hopping and flapping.

“Dima?” I called.

The wailing got quieter. There were at least two of them in there. I hopped around the corner, where it was pitch black.

Suddenly a hand flew at me. I had just enough time to dodge it from its clumsy swing. I jumped back, fearful of the increasingly numerous wails. Then my instincts kicked in. I headed in deeper, watching out for the hands and found something made of twigs and dead leaves. I dragged it out into the sunlight with my beak. It was a bed. And I'd managed to carry with it two small humans, wailing for nothing. Wrapped tightly

with locks of reddish hair.

THE END